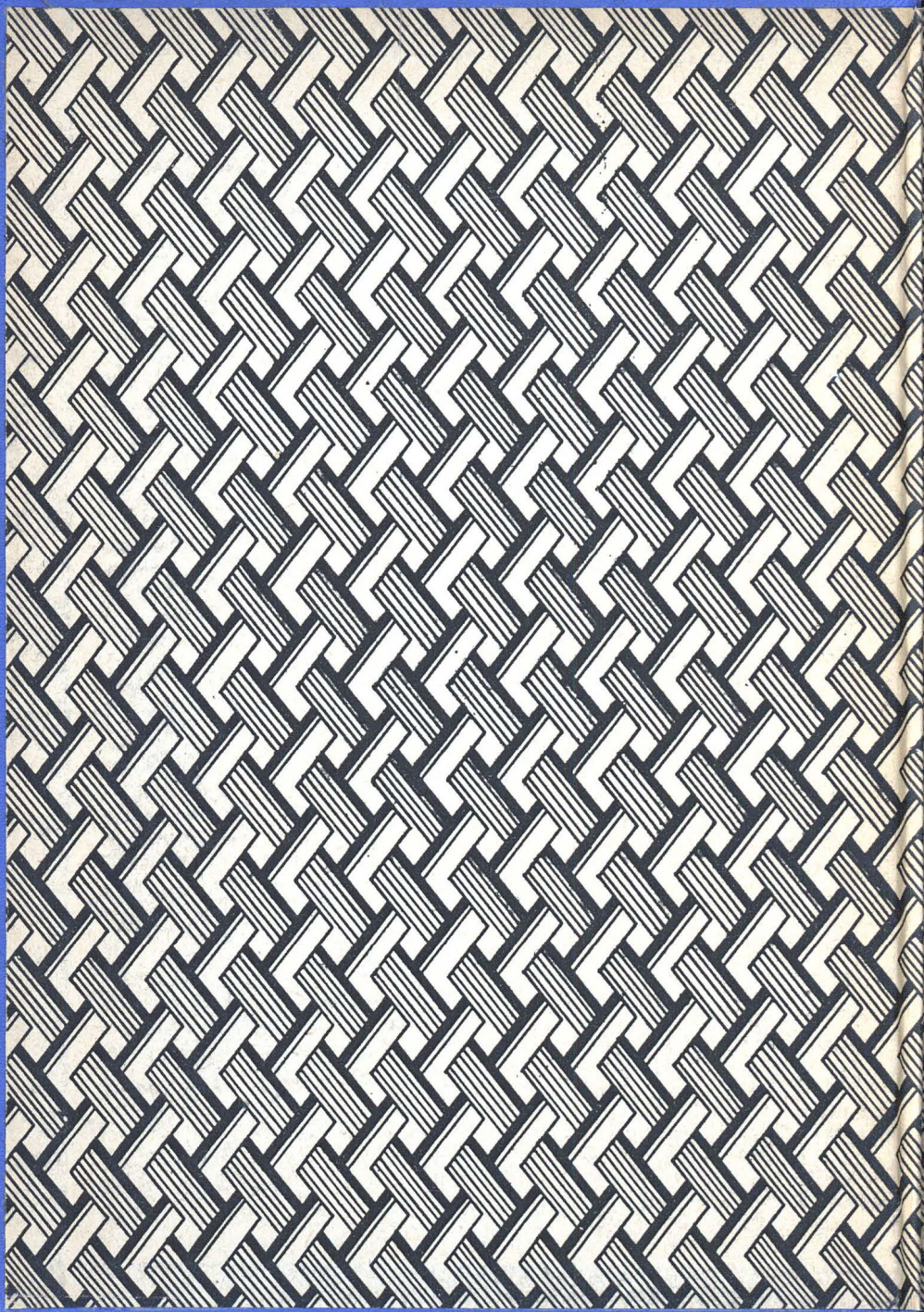
THE CRY AT MIDNIGHT

MILDRED A. WIRT



This is my book

Nancy Louise Vankat

"Gaze deep into the glass. Deep—Deep . . ."

"The Cry at Midnight" (See Page 44)

The Cry at Midnight

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

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MYSTERY STORIES

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL
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VOICE FROM THE CAVE
GUILT OF THE BRASS THIEVES
SIGNAL IN THE DARK
WHISPERING WALLS
SWAMP ISLAND
THE CRY AT MIDNIGHT

Other Titles in Preparation

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The Cry at Midnight

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CONTENTS

1	MIDNIGHT AT THE GATE	*1*
2	"NO TRESPASSING"	*8*
3	STRANGER OF THE STORM	*17*
4	VANISHING FOOTPRINTS	*24*
5	A CRYSTAL BALL	*35*
6	CREAKING WOOD	*45*
7	A WARNING	*51*
8	INTO THE CREVASSE	*59*
9	A CALL FOR HELP	*67*
10	MR. ECKENROD'S SECRET	*73*
11	MAP OF THE MONASTERY	*79*
12	THE LOCKED DOOR	*86*
13	OLD JULIA'S WARNING	*96*
14	AN ASSIGNMENT FOR PENNY	*105*
15	FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW	*116*
16	THE KITCHEN CUPBOARD	*125*
17	THE CULT CEREMONY	*132*
18	ELEVEN BOWLS	*141*
19	A DORMITORY ROOM	*147*
20	TRICKERY	*155*

21 SNATCHED FROM THE FLAMES 163
22 THE CANOPIED BED 170
23 DESCENT INTO THE CRYPT 178
24 CHAMBER OF THE DEAD 186
25 THE STAR SAPPHIRE 197

CHAPTER

1

MIDNIGHT AT THE GATE

AFTER A LONG, tiring climb, the two friends, Penny Parker and Jerry Livingston, had reached the summit of Knob Hill, far above the city of Riverview.

Now as they paused in the moonlight to catch their breath, the slim, golden-haired girl bent to adjust the irons of her skis before making a swift descent to the clearing below.

"We'll not have many more glorious skiing nights like this one," she said regretfully. "Anytime now, the weather is due to turn warm."

Jerry, a reporter at the *Riverview Star*, nodded as his gaze swept the snowy hillside, unmarked save for the herring-bone tracks made by their own skis.

Tall and muscular, he was several years older than Penny, who attended high school. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly, giving him the appearance of a semi-amused spectator of the world's goings-on.

"Jerry, it's getting late," she reminded him. "This will have to be our last run tonight. Ready?"

"Okay, I'll race you to the valley!" the reporter challenged. "Let's go!"

Digging in their poles, they flashed off down the hillside. Though they started together, Penny soon forged ahead, descending the steep slope in graceful, curving Christiania turns.

Beneath the mellow moon, snow crystals were brilliant with light. Every pine bristled with glowing icicles. Penny, feeling the rush of wind on her cheek, drew in her breath and was glad to be alive.

With effortless ease, she swung her hips for the sharp turns between the trees. Finally reaching the clearing, she brought up with a spectacular jump-turn and waited for Jerry who was close behind.

"You're getting faster every trip!" he praised. "I haven't a chance any more!"

Penny laughed, and with her arm linked in his, glided on to the fire where a group of noisy young people were roasting wieners and boiling coffee.

"Time you're getting back!" declared Louise Sidell, a dark-haired girl in heavy red woolen snowsuit. She was on her knees in the snow, feeding hickory chips to the cherry red fire.

Louise considered Penny her dearest friend. Though she would not have admitted it, she was

slightly green-eyed whenever another person claimed any of her chum's attention.

"M—m! That coffee smells delicious!" Penny cried, sniffing the fragrant aroma. "I'm starved too!"

She and Jerry made their own sandwiches and poured the steaming beverage. After they had finished eating, the reporter suggested one last climb to Knob Hill.

"It's nearly midnight," said Louise, before Penny could accept. "Oughtn't we to be starting home?"

Immediately a loud chorus of protest arose from other members of the party. Penny looked at her wristwatch regretfully.

"I hate to break up the party," she said. "But I promised Dad I would be in fairly early tonight. Lou and I will run along, and the rest of you stay."

"I'll take you home if you must leave," Jerry offered.

"Oh, Penny has her car," said Louise quickly. "It's parked on the roadside just over the hill."

"Yes," Penny added, "we'll ski down there and be home in a few minutes."

"You're not afraid to go alone?" Jerry asked teasingly.

"Afraid?" The question caught Penny by surprise. "Why should we be?"

"You'll have to pass the old deserted Abbington

Monastery to reach your car. It's a spooky place at night!"

Penny arose and slipped her wrists through the loops of her ski poles. "Now don't put ideas into our heads!" she chuckled. "It's just another building."

"Sure you don't want me to go along?" urged Jerry.

"Of course not! Louise and I can handle any ghost we'll meet tonight!"

The girls glided away, pausing at the top of the slope to wave goodbye to their friends. Then they shot down the hill on a trail which skirted a dense grove of pine.

Ahead loomed the gloomy old Abbington Monastery, a structure of moldy stone enclosed by a high brick wall. To the right, inside the enclosure, was an ancient graveyard, many of its white stones at rakish angles.

Penny studied the building with keen interest as she waited for Louise to catch up with her. Built generations earlier, the property first had been used by an order of Black Friars bound to the vows of poverty and obedience.

Later, the monastery had been taken over by an order of nuns, but as the buildings deteriorated, the property had been abandoned. For ten years now, it had stood unoccupied.

"Ugly old place!" puffed Louise, pausing beside her

chum to catch her breath. "All the windows broken —why, that's funny!"

"What is?" demanded Penny.

"The windows aren't broken! They've been replaced!"

"Probably the owner did it to save his property from going completely to wreck and ruin. Wonder who owns the place anyhow?"

"The last I heard, it was sold at public auction for taxes. I think a real estate man bought it for a song."

"Then maybe he intends to fix it up for rent or sale," Penny remarked. "But who would want to live in that ancient shell? Somehow, the place gives me the creeps!"

Louise was staring hard at an upstairs window of the distant building.

"Penny!" she exclaimed. "I saw a moving light just then!"

"Where?"

Louise pointed to the window high on the stone wall of the monastery.

"I don't see anything," replied Penny. "You must have imagined it."

"I did not! The light is gone now. But I saw it plainly. It may have been from a lantern. Someone was moving from room to room!"

"Maybe it was a reflection of moonlight then."

Undisturbed, Penny removed her skis. Carefully placing the running surfaces together, she threw them over her left shoulder.

Far away, in the city of Riverview, a tower clock began to chime the hour of midnight.

"Penny!" insisted Louise in a half-whisper. "I did see a light! Maybe the old monastery is haunted—"

"Now hush!" Penny silenced her. "What are you trying to do? Work up a case of nerves?"

"But—"

"Just climb out of those skis and come on, my pet." Penny moved briskly away. "We're late now."

"Wait for me!" Frantically, Louise fumbled with her ski irons. "Don't leave me here alone!"

"Then not another word about ghosts!" Penny chided.

However, she waited patiently until her chum had removed the skis. The two girls then walked rapidly toward the roadside where the car had been parked. No longer could they see the friendly campfire in the valley. As they drew closer to the monastery, towering pines blotted out the moonlight.

Like a powerful magnet, the old stone building drew their gaze.

Deep snow, glittering with an eerie blue lustre, lay heavy on the high boundary wall. In the deserted garden beyond the gatehouse, several statues also were covered with soft white shrouds.

Louise clutched her chum's hand and urged her to a faster pace.

Then suddenly, with one accord, the girls halted.

Directly ahead, at the front entrance to the monastery, a big rusty gate stood slightly ajar!

"It's open!" whispered Louise. "Why, never before have I seen that gate unlocked!"

For an instant, Penny too was slightly unnerved. But she replied steadily: "What of it? Perhaps someone has moved in."

While Louise watched uneasily, she walked to the gate, fingering the rusty chain which dangled in the snow.

Then boldly, she pushed the gate farther open.

"Don't go in there!" Louise warned, her voice sharp with anxiety. "Please come on."

Penny's ears were deaf to the plea. She stared intently at a trail of footprints which led from where she stood to a circular stone gatehouse only a few yards away. The marks were very large and had been made by a man's heavy boot.

"Lou—" she began, but the words froze on her lips.

From inside the monastery came a shrill, piercing scream. As the girls huddled together, the sound died slowly away.

Then a silence, even more terrifying, fell upon the grounds.

CHAPTER

2

"NO TRESPASSING"

"SOMEONE *is* inside that building!" Penny exclaimed, recovering from startled surprise.

Tensely, the girls waited, but the sound was not repeated.

"It was a woman's scream," Louise whispered after a moment. Nervously, she clung to her chum's hand as they stood in the shadow of the big iron gate. "What can be happening in there?"

Penny stared at the dark monastery, uncertain what to do. Nowhere was a light visible, yet she felt that not only was the building occupied, but also that alert eyes were watching them from somewhere in the gloomy interior.

"Someone may be in trouble and need help," she said in an unsteady voice. "Let's rap on the door and ask."

"At this time of night?" Louise tugged at her chum's hand, trying to pull her away. "Let's go,

Penny! It's really none of our affair what goes on here."

"But someone may be ill and in need of a doctor."

"It wasn't that type of scream," Louise replied with a shiver. "That cry gave me the creeps!"

Penny allowed herself to be pulled from the gate, only to pause and gaze again at the darkened windows of the ancient monastery.

The only daughter of a newspaper owner, she had been trained to inquire the who, when, why, where, and how of anything unusual. Penny never willingly passed up an opportunity to obtain a good news story for the *Riverview Star*. She knew that if the old monastery were occupied after standing deserted so many years, the readers of her father's paper would be interested.

Furthermore, she reasoned, a scream from a darkened house, always called for investigation.

"Louise," she said with sudden decision. "We can't leave without trying to find out what's wrong here! I'm going inside!"

"Oh, Penny—please don't! This place is so far from other houses. If anything should happen—"

"Something *has* happened," replied Penny grimly. "You wait here, Lou. I'll be right back."

Despite her chum's protest, she returned to the big iron gate, and pushing it farther open, stepped inside the grounds.

Intuition warned Penny to proceed cautiously. She sensed rather than saw a dark figure crouching in the arched doorway of the circular stone gatehouse to the right of the snow-banked driveway.

Before she could decide whether the form was real or a product of her imagination, a large, savage dog darted from inside the gatehouse. His low growl warned her it might be dangerous to attempt to pass.

"Come back!" Louise called anxiously. "He'll tear you apart!"

Though no coward, a second glance at the dog convinced Penny that the animal had been trained to guard the property. Rapidly, she backed away.

Her hand was on the latch of the gate, when in the gatehouse doorway, she beheld a grotesque, deformed human figure.

The sight so startled Penny that for an instant she forgot the dog.

Plainly silhouetted against the gray stone was a hulk of a man with large head and twisted back made unsightly by a hump.

Though his eyes were full upon the girl, he remained motionless, speaking no word.

"Call off your dog!" Penny said sharply.

Only then did the figure move from the doorway into the moonlight.

"Quiet, Bruno!" he ordered in a rasping voice. "Lie down!"

As the dog obeyed, Penny caught her first plain glimpse of the deformed man's face. His skin was heavily lined and fell in deep folds at his stocky neck. But it was the dark, intent eyes which sent a shiver down her spine.

"Good evening," she said uneasily.

The gateman did not respond to the greeting. Instead, he demanded gruffly:

"What you doin' on this property?"

"Why, I was only investigating because the gate was unlocked," replied Penny. "I didn't know the house was occupied."

"You know it now. See that sign!" The gateman turned on his flashlight, focusing it upon a freshly painted placard tacked to a nearby tree.

The sign read, "No Trespassing."

"I'm sorry," Penny apologized, but stood her ground. "Are you the new owner of this place?"

"No, I ain't. I'm the gateman."

"Then who has taken over the building?"

"What's it to you?" the hunchback demanded unpleasantly.

"I'm interested, that's all."

"This place is being turned into an institution," the hunchback informed her. "The new owner moved in yesterday. Now git along, so I can lock the gate."

The gateman's eagerness to be rid of her made

Penny all the more determined to remain until her curiosity was satisfied.

"Perhaps I fancied it," she remarked, "but a moment ago, I thought I heard a shrill scream from inside the building."

"You may have heard the howl of the wind."

"What wind?" Penny inquired pointedly. "It's a comparatively quiet night. I distinctly heard a scream."

"Then you got better ears than I have," the gateman muttered. "Will you go now, or do you want me to call the master?"

"I wish you would!"

Grumbling to himself, the hunchback stepped into the gatehouse and pressed a button which rang a bell inside the building.

A light went on in a downstairs room, and a moment later the front door opened. Framed on the threshold stood a very tall man in dark, hooded robe.

"What's wrong, Winkey?" he called. "You rang?"

"There's a girl here wants to see you," shouted the hunchback. "She says she heard a scream and wants to know how-come."

Treading lightly in the loose snow, the thin man came down the driveway to the gate. His long, brown robes were impressive, his demeanor pious. Penny suddenly felt very foolish indeed.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked in a kindly, silken-smooth voice.

"This girl's tryin' to get in," announced Winkey. "Says she heard a scream."

The hooded monk studied Penny with an intent gaze.

"You live near here?" he inquired.

"In Riverview. I was out skiing with a few friends when I passed this old building and heard the scream. Your gateman tried to tell me it was only the wind."

"My child, doubtlessly you did hear a scream," the monk replied. "It was Old Julia, a poor woman, who unfortunately sometimes becomes disturbed in her mind."

"This isn't a mental institution?" gasped Penny, regretting that her curiosity ever had taken her inside the grounds.

"No, my child," responded the monk. "Winkey should have explained. We have opened up the old monastery for the purpose of restoring an ancient order in which members dedicate themselves to a life of poverty, good will, and charity."

"The one you call Old Julia—she also is a member?"

The monk sighed deeply. "Old Julia is only an unfortunate whose twisted mind never can be healed by doctors. Because she had no home—no friends, I have taken her beneath my roof."

"I see," nodded Penny. "I'm very sorry to have troubled you."

"A natural mistake, my child. Is there anything else you wish to know? We have no secrets here—only serene faith and hope for a better world."

"I might inquire your name."

"Members of my flock call me Father Benedict. My baptismal name is Jay Highland. And yours?"

"Penny Parker. My father owns the *Riverview Star*."

"A newspaper?" The monk's inquiry was sharp.

"One of the best in the city," Penny said proudly.

"Your father sent you here, perhaps?"

"Oh, no! I was just passing by and noticed the buildings were occupied."

"To be sure," murmured the monk. "I trust you will use discretion in mentioning our work here. Should we become too well known, a path will be beaten to our door, and the privacy of our order will be no more."

"I'll scarcely mention it," Penny half-heartedly promised. "Good night."

Retreating through the gate, she closed it behind her.

A few paces away, Louise, who had heard only part of the conversation, waited in the darkness.

"Who were those men?" she demanded, falling into step with her chum. "What did you learn?"

Penny repeated everything Jay Highland had told her.

"He seemed rather nice," she added. "But when you sum it up, he didn't tell much about the order he is founding here."

"And the scream?"

"Oh, he explained that. It seems an old woman named Julia lives in the institution. She's demented."

"Must be a nice place!" The girls now had reached the car and Louise stood aside for her chum to unlock the door. Quickly they stowed their skis and poles in the rear and then Penny started the motor which popped and sputtered in the frosty air.

"It's snowing again," she observed, switching on the windshield wiper. "We didn't get started a minute too soon."

Before the girls had traveled a quarter of a mile, huge, wet flakes pelted the glass. Once as the wiper stuck, Penny had to get out and clear the windshield with a handkerchief.

"This is really getting awful!" she exclaimed, as they drove slowly on along the narrow, curving country road. "I can hardly see."

"Be careful," Louise warned a moment later. "You're close to the ditch."

Penny brought the wheels back onto the main track. But a dozen yards farther on, she saw directly in her path, a bent figure struggling along under the weight

of a heavy suitcase. Her head was held low against the wind and snow.

Unaware of the approaching car, the pedestrian was walking almost in the center of the road.

"Look out, Penny!" screamed Louise as she too saw the girl with the heavy burden. "You'll run her down!"

CHAPTER

3

STRANGER OF THE STORM

PENNY SWERVED the steering wheel, missing the girl by inches. Somewhat shaken by the near-accident, she pulled up at the roadside.

"My, that was close!" exclaimed Louise. Lowering the side window of the coupe, she gazed curiously at the snowy figure, plodding through the drifts.

"Maybe we ought to offer her a lift to Riverview," said Penny. "Whoever she is, she shouldn't be walking alone at this time of night—and with a heavy suitcase too."

"But should we pick up a hitchhiker, Penny? It might not be safe."

"I don't like to do it as a rule, but this is different. It's storming hard and she looks about our age."

Debating no longer, Penny thrust her head through the window opening and called: "Want a ride?"

The girl with the suitcase had moved into the glare of the headlights. She turned toward the car with a

startled expression. Penny and Louise saw that she was thinly clad in a light weight coat, and wore no galoshes.

To their astonishment, the girl shook her head and kept on walking.

"Well, what do you know!" exclaimed Penny. "She's more afraid to ride with us than we were to pick her up. She may not realize we're just a couple of school girls."

"She shouldn't be out in this storm dressed as she is," declared Louise, now concerned for the stranger. "Ask her again."

Penny shifted into low gear and pulled alongside. "Please, can't we give you a lift into the city?" she urged.

The girl stopped then, resting her suitcase in the roadway. A breath of wind swept a lock of dark hair across her thin face. Impatiently she brushed it aside and murmured: "No, no, thank you."

Penny would have driven on, but the voice held a hint of tears. It occurred to her that the girl might be running away from home—certainly she was bewildered and in trouble.

"Don't be foolish!" she exclaimed. "This snow is coming down heavier every minute. Of course, you want a ride." She flung the car door wide open.

A moment longer the girl hesitated. Then without a word, she swung the suitcase into the automobile and

squeezed in beside Louise. However, she scarcely glanced at the girls, but centered her sober gaze on the snowflakes which danced across the windshield.

The car moved ahead. "Going far?" inquired Penny.

"I—I don't know."

"You don't know!" Penny twisted her head sideways to stare at the girl. She started to ask a question, then thinking better of it, remained silent.

Louise, however, could not allow the odd reply to pass unchallenged.

"Why, you must know where you're going!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean you have no home, or are running away?"

"I have a home," the girl replied shortly. "I only meant I haven't decided where I'll go or what I'll do when I reach Riverview. That's the name of the closest place, isn't it?"

Penny nodded. "Apparently, you come from some distance away," she remarked.

The girl made no reply.

"May we introduce ourselves?" said Louise, determined to learn the stranger's name. "This is Penny Parker, and I'm Louise Sidell."

Only by a brief nod did the girl acknowledge the introduction. She did not volunteer her own name. Her failure to do so, obviously was deliberate.

"Do you live near here?" Louise inquired.

The stranger squirmed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't feel like answering questions. That's why I didn't want to accept a ride."

Louise took the reply for a rebuke. "I certainly didn't mean to be personal," she returned stiffly. "Excuse it, please. Dreadful weather!"

The topic fell flat. No further attempt at conversation was made.

Penny kept close watch of the road, for the heavy, wet snow made visibility very poor. She was greatly relieved when they reached the outskirts of the city and a wide boulevard which followed the curve of the frozen river.

Seeing the lights of Riverview, the strange girl began to watch the streets intently.

"Just let me out anywhere," she said presently.

"Anywhere?" Penny repeated.

"Will we pass the river docks on this road?"

"Yes, at the next turn."

"Then let me off there, please."

"The river docks!" exclaimed Louise. "At this time of night? No boats are running and there are no houses or business places close by. Only deserted fish houses and the like."

"Please, that's where I want to get off."

Penny and Louise gave up trying to figure out their strange passenger. At the next turn in the road, they pulled up near a dimly lighted street corner.

The girl opened the car door and reached for her suitcase.

"Thanks for the ride," she said in a low voice. "I'm sorry if I seemed rude and unfriendly. There are things I can't explain."

Before Penny or Louise could answer, the car door closed firmly in their faces.

"Well, how do you like that?" the latter demanded furiously. "If she isn't a cool cucumber!"

"She may be running away from home," Penny said, frowning. "Why otherwise, would she refuse to tell her name?"

"And why did she insist in getting out on this corner, of all places?"

"It's a bad section of town, Louise. No one seems to be about, but even so, a girl shouldn't be wandering around here alone."

"We tried to warn her. She seemed to know what she wanted to do."

"All the same, I feel sort of responsible," Penny returned uneasily. "I hope nothing happens to her."

After leaving the car, the girl walked toward the river. Now at the corner, she paused beneath a street light, and glanced back.

"She's waiting for us to go on!" Penny guessed shrewdly. "For some reason, she doesn't want anyone to know where she's going!"

"Then let's wait and watch!"

"We'll learn nothing that way. She can tell we're keeping our eye on her." Penny threw in the clutch and the car rolled away from the curb. "Tell you what, Lou! We'll drive around the block."

"Good idea!" approved her chum. "That way she'll think we've gone and we can see where she really goes."

Penny turned at the first corner and made a quick trip around the block. As they again came within view of the ice-locked river, the girls looked quickly up and down the street for a glimpse of their former passenger.

"There she is!" Louise cried. "Why, she's walking straight to the docks!"

The two girls now were completely mystified and not a little worried. At this late hour, the waterfront was deserted.

Penny watched the retreating figure for a moment, and then swung the car door open.

"That girl can't know what she's doing!" she decided. "I'm going after her!"

"For our pains, we may be told to mind our own affairs."

"That's beside the point, Lou. Something's wrong."

Without taking time to lock the car, the two girls hurried down the dark street toward the docks. Far ahead they could see the one they pursued walking

swiftly. Then in the blinding, whirling snow, they lost sight of her.

Reaching the waterfront, Penny and Louise gazed about in disbelief and bewilderment. The girl had vanished.

"Now where could she have gone—" Penny murmured, only to break off as her gaze fell upon a trail of footsteps.

The prints led along the dock for a short distance, only to end at the river's edge.

CHAPTER

4

VANISHING FOOTPRINTS

"THAT CRAZY girl must have jumped off here!" Louise exclaimed, as she too saw the footprints on the snowy planks.

"The river is solid ice—at least six inches thick," Penny pointed out. "She couldn't have crashed through."

"Then where did she go?"

Far upstream toward the Main Street Bridge, an iceboat could be seen tacking back and forth. Otherwise, the river was a gleaming ribbon of deserted ice.

"The only place she could have gone is under the dock," Penny said, her eyebrows knitting into a puzzled frown.

"*Under* it?"

"That's what she must have done," Penny insisted. "I suppose the planking would give some protection from the storm."

The snow was coming down harder now than ever,

in huge flakes. Trailing the footprints to the dock's edge, Penny flattened herself on the planks and peered over the side.

"I can't see a thing!" she complained. "Dark as pitch!"

"Listen!" commanded Louise.

Both girls became quiet. Distinctly they could hear a faint creak of snow as someone walked beneath the dock, a long distance away.

"Hello, down there!" shouted Penny.

The creaking sound ceased. But no one answered the call.

"If she's down there, she'll never answer!" Louise said, thoroughly disgusted. "Should we go after her?"

Penny was sorely tempted. She studied the long, high dock only to shake her head.

"If once we get down there, we couldn't climb up again without walking a long distance, Lou."

"Then what should we do?"

"Let's call the police station," Penny urged. Scrambling to her feet, she brushed snow from her ski suit. "This is a case for them to investigate."

"That's what I think," agreed Louise, greatly relieved. "I know my parents wouldn't want me prowling under the docks at night."

Pelted by fast falling snow, the two friends returned to the parked car and then drove to a drugstore several blocks away. Penny telephoned Central Police Sta-

tion, only to be informed a car could not be sent to the river for a few minutes. Heavy snow had snarled traffic, causing many accidents and tying up police personnel.

For twenty minutes the girls waited patiently in their car, but no one came to investigate. At last, giving up in disgust, they drove to their homes.

Try as she would, Penny could not forget the strange girl with the suitcase who had been so unwilling to answer questions. Who was she? And why had she taken refuge beneath the river docks?

She longed to talk the matter over with her father, but Mr. Parker had gone to bed early.

Penny kept thinking about the matter until she fell asleep and it was foremost in her thoughts when she awoke in the morning.

"Wonder if the *Riverview Star* carried any mention of a police investigation at the river?" she mused.

Dressing rapidly, she ran downstairs to bring the morning paper in from the porch. Eagerly she scanned the pages.

"Not a single word here!" she exclaimed in disappointment. "Maybe the police didn't even bother to search the dock area."

To make certain, she telephoned Captain Brownell, a personal friend at Central Station. The officer explained that a police car had been dispatched to the river shortly after one o'clock. Footprints noted

earlier by the two girls, had been blotted out by falling snow. No one had been found loitering in the area.

"Well, that's that," sighed Penny, turning away from the telephone. "I wish now, Lou and I had taken a chance and prowled under the dock."

From the breakfast alcove, Anthony Parker, a tall, lean man with iron gray hair and intelligent eyes, regarded his daughter in amusement.

"Talking to yourself again, Penny?" he teased.

"I am!" Penny slid into a chair beside her father and reached for a tall glass of orange juice. "The things I'm thinking about the police department aren't complimentary either! What this town needs is a larger force and at least a dozen extra patrol cars!"

"You could find plenty of work for them, I judge."

"Couldn't I? A nice situation when police are too busy to investigate an important call promptly!"

"So they gave you the run-around," teased Mr. Parker. "Suppose you tell me what happened."

Starting at the very beginning, Penny told of hearing the strange cry at the old monastery and later, the meeting with the unfriendly girl who had disappeared near the river docks.

While she related her odd experiences, Mrs. Maud Weems, the family housekeeper, came in bearing a platter of scrambled eggs. Since the death of Penny's mother, the woman had cared for the girl as her own daughter.

She listened attentively to the tale of adventure, and with obvious disapproval.

"In my opinion, that's what comes of midnight skiing parties!" she interrupted the story. "I hope you stay away from Knob Hill and the monastery after this."

"Oh, Mrs. Weems!" Penny's elfin face lost a little of its excited glow. "This wonderful skiing weather can't last many days! I simply must go back there!"

"To ski or to investigate the monastery?" asked the housekeeper. "If I know the signs, you're hot on the trail of another mystery!"

"Naturally I want to learn more about that strange cult," grinned Penny. "Who knows, I might track down a bang-up story for Dad's paper!"

"Skiing always seemed a wholesome sport to me," interposed Mr. Parker, winking slyly at his daughter. "Of course, I don't approve of late hours."

Mrs. Weems sighed as she set the egg platter down hard on the table. "You two always conspire against me!" she accused.

"Why, Mrs. Weems!" Penny observed innocently. "Don't you approve of skiing?"

"Skiing is only an excuse and you know it, Penelope Parker! Oh, dear, I try so hard to raise you properly."

"And you're doing a magnificent job, if I do say so myself," chuckled Penny. "Don't give the matter any further thought!"

"Penny always has proven she uses her head and knows how to take care of herself," added Mr. Parker. "An inquisitive mind is an asset—especially in the newspaper business."

With an injured sniff, Mrs. Weems retreated to the kitchen to wash the dishes.

Alone with her father, Penny grinned at him affectionately. His defense of her conduct meant only one thing! He did not disapprove of her interest in the monastery at Knob Hill.

"He's giving me the 'go' signal!" she thought jubilantly. Aloud she said. "Dad, don't you think Jay Highland and the monastery might be worth a feature story in the *Riverview Star?*"

"Possibly," he agreed, getting up from the table. "Well, I must move along to the office."

A little disappointed because her father had brushed the subject aside so lightly, Penny spent the morning helping Mrs. Weems with household tasks. However, directly after luncheon she packed her skis and prepared to set off for Knob Hill.

Unwilling to go alone, Penny stopped at the Sidell home. To her disappointment, Louise had gone shopping and was not expected back for several hours.

"Maybe I can induce Dad to go with me!" she thought. "He spends entirely too much time indoors. An outing will do him good!"

At the *Star* plant in the heart of downtown River-

view, Penny wandered through a nearly deserted editorial room to her father's office. For a morning paper the hour was early, and few reporters had as yet unhooded their typewriters.

Through the glass door Penny observed that her father had a visitor, a middle-aged, intelligent looking man she had never seen before. She would have slipped away had her father not motioned for her to enter.

"Penny, this is James Ayling, an investigator for the Barnes Mutual Insurance Co.," he said. "My daughter, Mr. Ayling."

The visitor arose to grasp the girl's hand firmly.

"Mr. Ayling is from Boston," explained the newspaper owner. He turned to the investigator. "Do you mind if I tell my daughter why you are here?"

"Not at all."

"Mr. Ayling is trying to locate an elderly woman whose family jewels are heavily insured with his company."

"Mrs. Hawthorne isn't actually our client," explained Mr. Ayling. "Originally, old Nathaniel Hawthorne, her late husband, insured a $100,000 star sapphire with us. The policy remains in effect until the gem becomes the possession of a granddaughter, Rhoda."

"Who has the sapphire now?" asked Penny, slightly puzzled.

"Mr. Hawthorne's will allows his wife the use of it during her lifetime. Upon her death it passes to the sixteen-year-old granddaughter, Rhoda Hawthorne."

"And you are searching for Mrs. Hawthorne now?" Penny inquired politely.

"Yes, so far as we know Mrs. Hawthorne has the gem. We are afraid it may be stolen from her or that she will dispose of it for a trifling sum. Mrs. Hawthorne hasn't been well and in her present state of mind she might act very foolishly."

"Tell Penny about the gem's history," suggested Mr. Parker.

"Oh, yes! The sapphire once was set in a necklace worn by a king who met violent death. Since then, there is a superstition that bad luck pursues the owner.

"The gem passed through many hands. Three times it was stolen. Several owners died strange or violent deaths."

"Not Mr. Hawthorne?"

"Well, he fell from a cliff while touring the West," explained the investigator. "Of course it was an accident, but Mrs. Hawthorne unfortunately became convinced his death resulted from ownership of the sapphire.

"She pleaded that the gem be sold for what it would bring, fearing that harm would come upon her grandchild when eventually the sapphire is turned over to her. According to terms of the will, the gem cannot

be sold, and our firm must remain responsible for it in case of theft or loss."

"Mrs. Hawthorne still has the gem then?"

"We hope so," Mr. Ayling replied. "She went South on a vacation trip with her granddaughter, taking the sapphire with her. That was over a month ago. Nothing since has been heard from them."

"But what brings you to Riverview?" questioned Penny.

"I went South searching for Mrs. Hawthorne. At Miami only a week ago she bought two tickets for Riverview. From that point on, I've been unable to trace her."

"Does she have relatives or friends here?"

"Not so far as I've been able to learn. Perhaps our company is unduly concerned, but the truth is, Mrs. Hawthorne is a very foolish, gullible woman. Should she dispose of or lose the gem, our firm must pay a large sum of money."

"We'll be glad to run a picture of Mrs. Hawthorne in the paper," offered Mr. Parker. "If she has arrived in Riverview, someone will have seen her."

"I certainly appreciate your interest," said Mr. Ayling. "Unfortunately, I have no photograph of Mrs. Hawthorne with me. I'll wire my office tonight for one."

"In the meantime, we'll run a little story," the pub-

lisher promised. "No doubt you can describe the woman."

"Oh, yes, in a general way. She's 68 years of age and walks with a cane. Her hair is white and she weighs about 150 pounds. She's deeply interested in art. Also in spiritualism and mystic cults, I regret to add."

"Mystic cults!" Penny's blue eyes began to dance with interest. She knew now why her father had made a point of calling her in to meet the investigator.

"Mrs. Hawthorne is very gullible and easily influenced. Since her husband died, she has been prey for one sharper after another. I judge a third of her fortune already has been squandered."

After a thoughtful pause, Penny hesitantly asked Mr. Ayling if he thought it possible Mrs. Hawthorne could have come to Riverview to join a cult.

"That's what I'm here to find out. Mrs. Hawthorne and her granddaughter have not registered at any of the leading hotels. Yet I know they came to the city."

"Have you tried the monastery at Knob Hill?" Penny suggested. "A new society has been established there in the last few days. I don't know much about the order yet, but its members are supposed to dedicate themselves to a life of charity and poverty."

"Why, that's exactly the sort of thing to attract Mrs. Hawthorne—for a few weeks," the investigator

replied. "Then after the novelty wore off, she would flit on to something else. Where is this place?"

"I plan to drive out there in a few minutes," Penny told him eagerly. "Why not come with me, Mr. Ayling?"

The investigator glanced inquiringly at Mr. Parker.

"Go ahead if you think it's worth while," urged the publisher.

"I suppose the chance of finding Mrs. Hawthorne there is very remote," Mr. Ayling said, thinking aloud. "But I can't afford to overlook any possibility. Thanks, Miss Parker, I'll gladly accept your invitation."

"Want to come along, Dad?" Penny asked.

"No thanks," he declined. "I'm certain you'll be in good hands. Just let Mr. Ayling take the lead in any investigation."

"Why, Dad!" Penny protested. "You know me."

"I do, indeed," said Mr. Parker, smiling as he resumed his desk work. "That's why, I feel confident Mr. Ayling may look forward to a very interesting afternoon."

CHAPTER

5

A CRYSTAL BALL

PINE TREES and bushes hung in frozen arches along the winding road which led to the ancient monastery.

Parking the automobile near the iron boundary fence, Penny was quick to note that the big ornamental gate now was locked and securely fastened with chain and padlock.

"Are you sure this place is occupied?" Mr. Ayling asked as he alighted and followed Penny to the gate. "Why, the property is a wreck!"

"The gate was unlocked last night," the girl replied. "We may have trouble getting inside."

Pressing her face against the rusty iron spikes, she gazed hopefully toward the gatehouse. The door was slightly ajar. Winkey, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Mr. Ayling rattled the gate chain several times.

"No one seems to be around," he said in disappointment.

"Yes, there is!" Penny corrected.

Just then she caught a fleeting glimpse of a face at the tiny circular window of the gatehouse. She was convinced it was Winkey, who for some reason, intended to ignore their presence at the gate.

"Let us in!" she called.

"Open up!" shouted Mr. Ayling.

Still there was no rustle of life from the gatehouse.

"Disgusting!" Penny muttered. "I know Winkey is watching us! He's only being contrary!"

Mr. Ayling's angular jaw tightened. "In that case," he said, "we'll have to get in the best way we can. I'll climb over the fence."

The words purposely were spoken loudly enough to be overheard in the gatehouse. Before the investigator could carry out his threat, the door of the circular, stone building swung back. Winkey, the hunchback, sauntered leisurely out.

"Want somethin'?" he inquired.

"Didn't you hear us trying to get in?" Mr. Ayling demanded.

"Sure," the hunchback shrugged, "but I was busy fixin' the bell that connects with the house. Anyhow, visitors ain't wanted here."

"So we observe," said Mr. Ayling. "Where is your master?"

"Inside."

"Then announce us," the investigator ordered. "We're here to ask a few questions."

Winkey's bird-like eyes blinked rapidly. He looked as if about to argue, then changed his mind.

"Go on to the house then," he said crossly. "I'll let 'em know by phone you're comin'."

The driveway curled through a large outer courtyard where a cluster of small and interesting buildings stood in various stages of ruin.

Near the gatehouse was the almonry, a shelter used in very early days to house visitors who sought free lodging.

Beyond were the ancient brewhouse, bakehouse, and granary. The latter two buildings now were little more than heaps of fallen brick. None of the structures was habitable.

In far better state of preservation was the central building with gabled roof and tall hooded chimneys. However, front steps long since had fallen away from the entrance doorway. Bridging the gap was a short ladder.

"What a place!" commented Mr. Ayling offering Penny his hand to help her across. "Looks as if it might cave in any day."

The visitors found themselves facing a weather-beaten but beautifully carved wooden doorway. Before they could knock, it opened on squeaky hinges.

A woman with heavily lined face, who wore a gray gown and white lace cap, peered out at them.

"Go away!" she murmured in a stage whisper. "Go quickly!"

"Julia!" said a voice directly behind her.

The woman whirled around and cringed as a brown-robed monk took her firmly by the arm.

"Go and light a fire in the parlor, Julia," her master directed. "I will greet our guests."

"Yes, Father Benedict," the woman muttered, scurrying away.

The master now turned apologetically to the visitors.

"I trust my servant was not rude," he said. "Poor creature! Her twisted mind causes her to believe that all persons who do not dwell within our walls are evil and to be feared."

As the monk spoke, he smiled in a kindly, friendly way, yet his keen eyes were appraising the two visitors. Though it was cold and windy on the door step, he did not hasten to invite Penny and Mr. Ayling inside. He stood holding the half-opened door in his hand.

"You must excuse our lack of hospitality," he said, fingering a gold chain which hung from his thin shoulders. "We have much cleaning and remodeling to do before we are ready to receive visitors."

Mr. Ayling explained that his call was one of busi-

ness, adding that he represented the Barnes Mutual Insurance Co.

"Such matters must be discussed with me later," the monk said, slowly but firmly closing the door.

"I'm not selling insurance," Mr. Ayling assured him. Deliberately he leaned against the jamb, preventing the monk from shutting the door.

Father Benedict bit his lip in annoyance. "May I inquire your business with me?" he asked frostily.

"I'm seeking to trace a client—Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne."

"I know of no such person. Deeply I regret that I cannot help you, sir. If you will excuse me—"

"The woman may have used an assumed name," Mr. Ayling cut in. "She has a weakness—er, I mean a liking for cult practices."

"You are suggesting this woman may have joined my little flock?"

"That's the general idea."

"Absurd!" The monk's gaze rested briefly on Penny as he added: "I greatly fear you have been led astray by loose gossip as to the nature of the order I am founding here."

"I told Mr. Ayling about your work because I think it's so interesting," Penny said quickly. She slapped her mittened hands together. "My, it's cold today! May we warm ourselves at your fire before we start back to town?"

A frown puckered Father Benedict's eyebrows. Plainly the request displeased him. But with a show of hospitality, he said:

"Our abode is very humble and poorly furnished. Such as it is, you are welcome." Bowing slightly, he stepped aside to admit the visitors.

Penny and Mr. Ayling found themselves in a long, barren, and very cold hallway.

"Follow me, please," bade the monk.

Moving on the bare boards with noiseless tread, he led them through an arched doorway cut in the thick wall, across a wind-swept pillared cloister and into a parlor where a fire burned brightly in a huge, time-blackened fireplace.

The sheer comfort of the room surprised Penny. Underfoot was a thick velvet carpet. Other furnishings included a large mahogany desk, a sofa, two easy chairs, and a cabinet filled with fine glassware, gold and silver objects, and a blue glass decanter of wine.

Black velvet curtains were draped in heavy folds over an exit door, and similar hangings covered the windows. To Penny's astonishment, the ceiling, painted black, was studded with silver stars.

However, the object which held her roving gaze was a large crystal ball supported on the claws of a bronze dragon.

"You are a crystal gazer!" Mr. Ayling exclaimed as he too noted the curious globe.

"I have the power to read the future with reasonable accuracy," replied the monk. He dismissed the subject with a shrug, motioning for his guests to seat themselves before the fire.

"You spoke of searching for a Mrs. Rosenthorne—" he remarked, addressing the investigator.

"Mrs. Hawthorne," corrected Mr. Ayling.

"To be sure, Mrs. Hawthorne. Apparently you were under the misapprehension that she is in some way connected with this establishment."

"It was only a hope. My client has a deep interest in cults. I traced Mrs. Hawthorne and her granddaughter to Riverview, and thought possibly they might have been attracted to your place."

"My little flock is limited to only twelve members at present. All are very humble people who have sworn to live a life of poverty, devoted to charity and faith. We have no Mrs. Hawthorne here."

"Mightn't she have given another name?" suggested Penny. She stretched her cold fingers to the leaping flames on the hearth.

"I hardly think so." Father Benedict's lips curled in a superior smile. "Describe the woman, please."

Mr. Ayling repeated the description Penny had heard earlier that afternoon.

"We have no such person here," the monk said. "I regret I am unable to help you."

He arose, a plain hint that he considered the brief

interview at an end. Somewhat reluctantly, Penny and her companion also turned their backs upon the crackling fire.

"You have made a comfortable place of this room," the girl said. Her gaze fastened admiringly upon a porcelain decanter in a wall cabinet. "And such interesting antiques!"

For the first time since the visitors had arrived, Father Benedict's eyes sparkled with warmth.

"Collecting art treasures is a hobby of mine," he revealed. Crossing to the cabinet, he removed the decanter.

"This is a piece of Ching-Hoa porcelain and very rare," he said. "And here is a Byzantine amulet—priceless. The golden goblets came from a European church destroyed a century ago."

"You're not afraid to keep such treasures in the monastery?" Mr. Ayling inquired.

"Afraid?" Father Benedict's dark eyes glittered with a strange light. "I must confess I know not the meaning of the word."

"You are so far out, I don't suppose you can expect much police protection," Mr. Ayling added.

"Winkey, my gateman, is quite dependable. While he is on duty, no thief or unwanted stranger will enter our grounds."

"Winkey is good at keeping folks out," agreed the

investigator dryly. In walking toward the door, he paused to gaze again at the crystal ball.

"My glass interests you?" inquired the monk.

"I've seen those things before, but never took stock in them," rejoined Mr. Ayling. "One can't actually conjure up pictures by gazing into that globe?"

"Would you care to see for yourself?"

"Well, it's a little out of my line," Mr. Ayling laughed.

"I'd like to try it!" cried Penny. "May I?"

"Certainly. The principle is very simple. One merely gazes deeply into the glass until the optic nerve of the eye becomes fatigued. As it ceases to transmit impression from without, one sees events of the future."

"I've heard it explained a little differently," said Mr. Ayling. "As the optic nerve becomes paralyzed, it responds to the reflex action proceeding from the brain of the crystal gazer. One sees what one wishes to see."

"I do not agree!" Father Benedict's voice was sharp. "The ball accurately foretells the future. Shall we test and prove its powers?"

"Let me try it!" pleaded Penny again.

Smiling a bit grimly, the monk extinguished an overhead light and touched a match to the wick of two tall white candles.

Placing the crystal ball in front of a black screen, he set the burning tapers at either side. Penny suddenly began to lose zest for the adventure.

But before she could think of a graceful way to announce that she had changed her mind, the monk took her firmly by the arm.

"Place your hands on either side of the crystal ball," he directed. "Gaze deep into the glass. Deep—deep. And now my little one, what do you see?"

CHAPTER

6

CREAKING WOOD

AS PENNY peered down into the highly polished surface of the crystal clear glass, a multitude of dancing points of light drew and held her attention.

"Gaze deep—deeper," intoned the monk. "Do you not see a picture forming?"

"The glass has become cloudy."

"Ah, yes. In a moment it will clear. Now what do you see?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

Father Benedict tapped the toe of his slipper impatiently. "You are resisting the glass," he muttered. "You do not believe."

Penny continued to stare fixedly into the crystal ball. "It's no use," she said finally, pulling her eyes away. "Guess I haven't enough of the witch in me!"

She stepped back from the dragon standard on which the globe stood, and for a minute was stone blind.

"I can't see a thing!" she gasped in alarm.

"The optic nerve is paralyzed," said the monk, steadying her as she swayed slightly. "Vision will be normal in a moment."

"I'm beginning to distinguish objects now," Penny admitted, reassured.

The monk released her arm. Seating himself before the crystal globe, he placed his hands on the polished surface.

"Now shall I try?" he suggested. "What would you like to know about the future?"

"You might find Mrs. Hawthorne for me," the investigator said in jest.

In the darkened room, Father Benedict's hooded face looked grotesque as light from the tall tapers flickered upon his angular jaw bones.

The moment was impressive. A tomb-like silence had fallen upon the three, and the only sound was the crackle of the fire.

Then, quite suddenly, Penny was certain she heard another noise. Though the occasion should not have been one for alarm, she felt her skin prickle. A tiny chill caused her to shiver.

Or was it a chill? Against her cheek she felt a breath of icy wind. Somewhere beyond the room a door had opened. Unmistakably, she heard the creak of old wood.

Penny's startled gaze roved to Mr. Ayling. Ob-

livious to all else, the investigator was watching Father Benedict closely.

Every sense now alert, the girl listened intently. Had someone stepped on a loose board as he crept along the passageway? Or had she merely heard the old house groaning to itself?

The creaking sound was not repeated.

Trying to throw off the pall which had fallen upon her, Penny centered her full attention upon the monk. As one hypnotized by the glass into which he peered, he mumbled words difficult to understand.

"Now the ball is clearing," he muttered. "What is this? I see a resort city on the sea coast—the rush and roar of waves. Ah, a beach! On the sand are two bathers—one a girl of perhaps sixteen or seventeen with dark hair. She wears a green bathing suit. Upon her third finger is a black cameo ring."

A startled look came upon Mr. Ayling's face, but he made no comment.

"Her companion is an elderly woman," continued the monk as if speaking in a trance. "Over her shoulders is flung a dark blue beach cape. The picture is fading now—I am losing the vision."

Penny's attention, wandering again, was drawn as if by a powerful magnet to the curtains covering the exit.

In fascination, she watched. An inch at a time, the door moved outward. Then a hand appeared between

the black velvet draperies, cautiously pulling them apart.

Penny wondered if her eyes were playing tricks upon her. She felt an overpowering impulse to laugh or call out. Yet her throat was dry and tight.

The scene seemed fantastic. It couldn't be real, she told herself. Yet those curtains steadily were moving farther apart.

An arm came into view, then the side of a human figure. Last of all, a face, ghostly pale against the dark background, slowly emerged.

For one fleeting instant Penny saw a girl only a little older than herself, standing half wrapped in the folds of the velvet curtain. Their eyes met.

In that moment, through Penny's brain flashed the message that the one who crouched in the doorway was the same girl she and Louise had picked up on the road only the previous night.

"But that's crazy!" she thought. "It couldn't be the same person! I must be dreaming!"

The one behind the curtain had raised a finger to her lips as if commanding silence. Then the draperies were pulled together with a jerk and the figure was gone.

Another cold breath of air swept through the room, causing candles on either side of the crystal ball to flicker. Again Penny heard the soft *creak, creak* of wood as footsteps retreated.

She tried to speak, but the words stuck in her throat. Had her imagination played tricks upon her?

Slowly she turned her eyes upon Father Benedict, whose back had been toward the curtained door.

"Another picture is forming in the crystal ball," he muttered. "I see a man walking through a lonely wood. But what is this? Evil persons lie in wait behind the tall pine trees. Now they are waylaying him!

"They fall upon him and beat him with their cudgels. Woe is me! They leave him lying on the ground. The man is dying—dead. Oh, evil, evil! I can read no more in the glass today!"

Arising quickly, and brushing a hand over his glazed eyes, Father Benedict leaned for a moment against the damp plaster wall.

"Excuse me, please," he apologized. "What I saw was most unnerving."

The monk poured himself a drink of water and lighted a lamp on the center table.

"Now I can see again," he said in a more natural tone. "A reading always is an exhausting experience."

"Your demonstration was most impressive," said Mr. Ayling. "How would you interpret your vision of Mrs. Hawthorne?"

"I should say the woman and her granddaughter at this very moment are enjoying a pleasant vacation in a sunny climate. California perhaps, or Florida."

"Mrs. Hawthorne was in Florida, but she bought a ticket to Riverview."

"Obviously, she never arrived here," replied the monk. "You see, the crystal glass never lies."

"Then your advice would be to resume my search in Florida?" the investigator asked.

"I do not presume to advise you." From a cabinet, Father Benedict removed a black cloth which he used to polish away an imaginary speck on the crystal globe. Then he covered the standard with a cloth hood and added impressively: "However, I consider it my duty to warn you of danger."

"Warn me?" exclaimed Mr. Ayling. "Of what danger?"

"My second vision was most disturbing," Father Benedict said gravely. "As I interpret it, great harm —perhaps death, will pursue the man who walks alone in the woods, unless he alters his present course. You came to Riverview for a definite purpose, Mr. Ayling?"

"Why, yes, to find Mrs. Hawthorne."

"Mr. Ayling, for your own well being, you must abandon the search."

"Why?"

"Because," said the monk very low, "the vision was sent to me that you may be saved from disaster. The man attacked in the woods was yourself, Mr. Ayling!"

CHAPTER

7

A WARNING

IF FATHER Benedict's words disturbed the investigator, he gave no sign. Smiling, he said:

"I fear I am not a firm believer in the art of crystal gazing—all respect to your remarkable talent."

The monk frowned as he carefully laid another log on the dying fire. "You will be unwise to disregard the warning," he said. "Most unwise."

"Warning?"

"I should interpret the picture as such, dear Mr. Ayling. Apparently, if you pursue your present course, you are certain to meet misfortune."

"To what 'present course' do you refer?"

"That I would not know," replied the monk coldly. "Now may I thank you for coming to our humble abode and bid you good afternoon? I have a formal meeting soon with members of my little family of believers and must nap for a few minutes. You will excuse me?"

"We were just leaving," said Penny. "I'm really deeply interested in your society here. May I come sometime soon to watch a ceremony?"

The monk gazed at her sharply but answered in a polite voice:

"Later, when we are better organized and have our house in order, we shall be most happy to have you."

On the way out of the building, through the chilly cloister and gloomy hall, Penny looked carefully about for the girl who so stealthily had opened the door of the monk's study.

She saw no one. Mr. Ayling and Father Benedict, she was certain, were unaware of the incident which had so startled her.

"It wasn't imagination," she thought "I did see the door open. But it may not have been that girl Louise and I met last night. Probably it was a member of Mr. Highland's cult."

Deeply puzzled, Penny decided that if an opportunity presented itself, she would revisit the monastery another day.

At the front door of the building, Father Benedict turned to bid his guests goodbye. Before he could retreat, a loud commotion was heard near the gatehouse.

The monk listened intently and with evident annoyance. "My! My! What now?" he sighed. "Are we to have no peace and quiet within our walls?"

Near the front gate, Winkey could be seen arguing with a stout, middle-aged man in a racoon coat who carried an easel and a palette under his arm.

"My orders are to keep folks out o' here!" Winkey shouted. "I don't care who you are! Ye ain't settin' foot inside here, unless the boss says so! Now get out!"

"Try to put me out!" the visitor challenged.

"Okay, I will!" retorted the hunchback.

He would have seized the visitor by the arm, had not Father Benedict called to him from the doorway: "Winkey!"

"Yes, Father," the hunchback mumbled.

"Now tell me what is wrong," the cult leader bade as he went down to the gate, followed by Penny and Mr. Ayling. "Who is this gentleman?"

"My name is Vernon Eckenrod," the visitor introduced himself. "I'm an artist. I live down the road a quarter of a mile."

"He wants to come in and paint a picture," interposed Winkey. "I told him nothin' doing."

"Your man doesn't understand," said Mr. Eckenrod, glaring at the hunchback. "I am doing a series of pictures of the monastery for a national magazine. The sketches are finished and now I'm starting to paint."

"You mean you wish to do exterior scenes?"

"Exterior and also interior. I want to do the arch

to the chapter house today, and if I have time, either the stone-hooded chimneys or the window of the guest hall."

"You show remarkable familiarity with the monastery."

"I've been coming here for more than a year," the artist said, shifting his easel to a more comfortable position. "This building is one of the oldest in the state. See, I have a key." He held it before the startled gaze of the monk.

"Indeed!" Father Benedict's voice became less friendly. "And may I inquire how you came into possession of a key to my property?"

"Your property?"

"Certainly, I have rented these premises from the owner, with an option to buy."

"I've been trying to buy the place myself," the artist said, "but couldn't pay the amount asked. I'd like to restore the buildings and make it into a real show place."

"How did you obtain a key?" the monk reminded him.

"Oh, the owner gave me one. He lets me paint here whenever I like."

"The monastery now is exclusively mine," said Father Benedict. "Kindly turn the key over to me!"

"Surely" agreed Mr. Eckenrod, giving it up. "But

you won't mind if I come here to finish my paintings? I'm under contract to complete the work by the fifteenth of the month."

Father Benedict secreted the key in the folds of his robe. "I appreciate your position," he said. "Nevertheless, we cannot have strangers intruding upon our privacy."

"Why, everyone around here knows me! Ask anyone about my character and work!"

"I do not question your character, my good man. But I must request you not to come here again."

"Now see here!" the artist exclaimed, losing his temper again. "You don't get the idea! My pictures are half done. If I don't complete the order, I'll stand to lose months of work."

"Complete them from the sketches."

"I can't do that—the color and feeling would be lost."

Father Benedict turned as if to leave. "I am sorry," he said firmly.

"Listen—" Mr. Eckenrod began furiously.

The monk coldly walked away, entering the house.

"You heard him!" cried Winkey, triumphantly. "Now git going and don't come back!"

"All right, I'll go," the artist retorted. "But I'll be here again. You can't get away with this even if you have rented the property!"

Scarcely aware of Penny and Mr. Ayling, who followed him to the gate, Mr. Eckenrod stomped off with easel and palette.

"They can't get away with it!" he stormed, addressing no one in particular. "I'll come back here with the sheriff!"

"I'm afraid Father Benedict is within his rights," remarked Mr. Ayling. "He's taken over the property."

"What's that?" the artist became aware of his presence. "Oh yes," he admitted grudgingly," legally he is within his rights, I suppose. But what of justice?"

"It would seem only decent of him to allow you to complete your paintings."

"I've been coming to the monastery for months, off and on," the artist revealed in an aggrieved tone. "Always figured I'd buy the place. The owner, Peter Holden, picked it up at a foreclosure sale for a mere nothing. He'd have sold to me too, if this fellow hadn't come along. Who is he, anyhow?"

"I wonder myself," said Mr. Ayling.

"His gateman looks like a thug!"

"I'm afraid your unfortunate encounter with Winkey prejudiced you," smiled the investigator. "After all, the man apparently was acting under orders."

"I didn't like that monk either!" the artist scowled. "He acted as religious as my Aunt Sara!"

"His real name is Jay Highland," Penny contributed. "He's a crystal gazer."

"Humph! A fine calling! If the authorities are smart, they'll look into his business here!"

The trio now had reached the roadside where Penny's car was parked. Politely, she offered to give the artist a lift to his home.

"Thanks, but I'll walk," he declined the offer. "I live only a short distance. I'll just cut through the fields."

His dark eyes still snapping like firebrands, the artist strode off through the snow.

"Quite a character!" remarked Mr. Ayling, once he and Penny were in the car. "An eccentric!"

"I've heard Mr. Eckenrod really is a fine artist," Penny replied. "Too bad Father Benedict wouldn't let him complete his paintings. By the way, what did you think of him?"

"Well, if I'm any judge of character, he'll soon be back to make more trouble."

"No, I mean Father Benedict."

"He seemed pleasant enough," Mr. Ayling said slowly. "However, I can't say I went for the crystal ball demonstration."

"Oh, anyone could tell that was the bunk!"

"Frankly, it gave me quite a jolt."

"Oh, you mean the monk's warning!"

"Not that," replied Mr. Ayling. "His description of Mrs. Hawthorne and her daughter. Of course, I've never seen either of them, but the picture he conjured up seemed to fit them."

"Oh, he probably made it up." Penny started the car which rolled with creaking tires over the hilly, snow-packed road toward the city. "You described Mrs. Hawthorne to him earlier, you know."

"So I did. Except for one small detail, the reading would not have impressed me."

"And that detail?"

"In describing the girl on the beach, Father Benedict said she was wearing a black cameo ring."

"So he did! You certainly never mentioned that to him!"

"It rather jarred me," admitted Mr. Ayling. "Because, when Rhoda Hawthorne last was seen, she was wearing just such a cameo ring!"

CHAPTER

8

INTO THE CREVASSE

ENROUTE TO Riverview, Penny and Mr. Ayling discussed all phases of their strange interview with Father Benedict.

"The man may be all right," the investigator said. "Nevertheless, as a matter of routine I'll check on him. Where was he before he came to Riverview?"

"I never heard."

"And who are the members of his mysterious cult? Riverview people?"

"Not so far as I know. The only persons I've seen on the premises are Winkey, the one they call Julia, and a girl."

"A girl? Who is she?"

"I don't know. She peeped from behind a door while Father Benedict was giving the crystal ball reading. I started to speak and she motioned me to keep quiet. Then she slipped away."

"Odd."

"Yes, it was. For just a minute I thought she might be a girl I picked up on the road the other night in my car. The room was shadowy though, so I got no clear impression of her face."

"I'd like to meet the girl—also the other members of the cult."

"So would I! Why not visit there again soon?"

"We might try it tomorrow, say about this same time," proposed Mr. Ayling. "I don't plan to remain in Riverview longer than another twenty-four hours unless I obtain a clue to Mrs. Hawthorne's whereabouts."

"Maybe Winkey won't let us in," commented Penny dubiously.

"We'll worry about that when the time comes. Perhaps if he makes trouble, we can find ways to persuade him."

"Shall I pick you up at your hotel?" Penny offered.

"All right," the investigator agreed. "Meanwhile, I'll wire my office for photographs of Mrs. Hawthorne and her granddaughter which can be published in your father's paper. Also, I'll ask our company to check on Father Benedict's past. He may be operating a quick money racket here."

"Then you do distrust him!"

"Not exactly, but I've learned from past experience it pays to overlook nothing. Father Benedict is an eccentric. He may be all right and probably is. All

the same, it will be interesting to learn more about him."

A little later, after agreeing to meet the next afternoon at two o'clock, Penny dropped Mr. Ayling at his hotel. In a high state of excitement, she then drove on home to report the day's adventure to Mrs. Weems and her father.

"Mr. Ayling's awfully nice and smart too!" she declared at the dinner table. "Together we'll find Mrs. Hawthorne and solve the mystery of the monastery!"

"What mystery?" teased her father.

"I don't know yet," Penny admitted with a chuckle. "But give me time! I'll find one! I can feel it bubbling in the air!"

Mrs. Weems, who came into the dining room with a platter of roast beef, observed: "If you take my advice, you'll stay away from that place!"

"Oh, Mrs. Weems!"

"You only invite trouble by going there," the housekeeper said severely. "Furthermore, it will distract you from your school work."

"School teachers' convention this week!" Penny reminded her. "We're off tomorrow and next day too! Don't worry about anything happening to me at the monastery, Mrs. Weems. Mr. Ayling makes a dandy chaperon."

"If you're going with him, I suppose I can't pro-

test," the housekeeper gave in. "Mind, you're home before dark."

"I'll do my best," Penny grinned. "No rash promises though!"

The next afternoon, sharp at two o'clock, she drove to the front entranceway of the Riverview Hotel. Mr. Ayling was nowhere to be seen. After waiting ten minutes, she parked and went inside to inquire at the desk.

"Mr. Ayling has room 416," the clerk told her. "Doubt whether you'll find him in just now. He left here late last night and hasn't been back."

"That's queer," thought Penny. Aloud she asked if the investigator had left any message for her.

"Nothing," replied the clerk.

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"No, but he evidently intends to be back. His luggage is still here, and he hasn't paid his bill."

To satisfy herself, Penny telephoned Room 416. No one answered.

"Wonder if he could have thought he was to meet me at the monastery?" she mused. "Guess I may as well drive out there."

The sunshine was strong and the day slightly warm. Penny, who had worn heavy skiing clothes, shed her coat before she reached the monastery.

Pulling up at the barrier gate, she glanced hopefully about. Mr. Ayling was nowhere to be seen. If he

had arrived ahead of her, undoubtedly he was inside the building.

As Penny hesitated, wondering what to do, Winkey's ugly face appeared behind the iron spokes of the gate.

"You again!" he observed with a scowl.

"Yes, I'm looking for a friend of mine, Mr. Ayling, who was here yesterday."

"You think we got him hid somewheres?" the gateman asked insolently.

"I thought he might have come here again."

"Well, he didn't. And Father Benedict ain't here either. So you can't come in."

Though annoyed by the hunchback's curt manners, Penny held her temper in check.

"I very much wanted to talk to your master," she said. "I may ask him to allow me to join the cult."

The hunchback's eyes opened wide, and, as was his habit, he then blinked rapidly.

"You ain't here just to snoop around?" he asked with distrust.

"Such an idea!" Penny hoped that her laughter sounded convincing.

"If ye want to join the cult, you can talk to Father Benedict later," the hunchback said grudgingly. "But unless you got something to contribute, it's no use trying to get in."

"Money you mean?"

"Either cash on the line or jewels."

"And what becomes of the money?"

"It goes for charity." Winkey fast was losing patience. "Now cut out the questions!" he said crossly. "If you want to join the society, talk to the boss."

"Are there any other girls staying here?" Penny had been leading up to this question.

"Talk to the boss, I said!" Winkey snapped. "Maybe he'll be here tomorrow. Now go away and stop botherin' me. I got work to do!"

Disappointed by her failure to find Mr. Ayling or extract information from Winkey, Penny returned to the car.

Driving along the road a few minutes later, she glimpsed, far over the hills, a skier who descended the steep slope at breakneck speed.

"It's a wonderful day for skiing!" she thought, recalling that all of her equipment was ready in the car. "Why don't I make the most of it?"

Pulling up, Penny got out skis and poles. Hastily waxing the runners, she put them on and set off across the fields toward the distant hill.

The loose snow had blown into deep banks and crevasses. Penny frequently had been warned by more experienced skiers that visible crevasses nearly always were a warning of hidden ones.

At first as she raced along, she kept alert watch for

unexpected breaks or depressions in the snow. But as she drew near the hills to the rear of the old monastery, she frequently shifted her gaze toward the interesting old building.

Smoke curled lazily from the hooded chimneys. Otherwise, the premises appeared unoccupied.

Then, Penny saw a bent figure coming from the rear of the grounds, pulling a long sled behind him.

"Why, it's Winkey!" she recognized him. "Now what can he be doing with that sled? Surely at his age he isn't going coasting."

More than a little interested, the girl set her course the better to watch the hunchback. Soon she saw him striking off toward a pine woods and a large, two-story log cabin some distance away.

At the edge of the woods, not far from the cabin, had been stacked several cords of seasoned logs taken from the forest.

Pulling his sled alongside, Winkey began to pile it high with the cut firewood.

"I wonder if that's his wood?" thought Penny.

So absorbed had she become in Winkey's actions that she neglected to watch the drifts ahead. Too late, she saw that her singing skis were taking her directly into a wide, deep crevasse.

Desperately, Penny swerved and tried to check her speed. The break in the snow was extensive and could not be avoided.

Over the brink she shot. Poles flew from her hand and she clutched wildly for a hold on the bank. Failing, she tumbled over and over, landing in an ungainly heap of splintered skis at the base of the deep pit.

CHAPTER

9

A CALL FOR HELP

AFTER COMING to a stop at the bottom of the crevasse, Penny momentarily was too stunned to move.

Gradually recovering her breath, she gingerly twisted first one leg, then the other. Though pains shot through them, no bones were broken.

Rolling over on her back, the girl gazed up at the narrow opening far above her.

"Served me right for being so careless!" she thought. "But the $64 question, is how am I going to get out?"

With fingers numb from cold, Penny removed her broken skis.

Walls of the hole into which she had fallen were sharp and firm with frozen ice, offering few if any handholds.

Unwilling to call attention to her plight unless absolutely necessary, she studied the sheer walls care-

fully, and then, grasping a projection, tried to raise herself to a ledge just over her head. The ice broke in her fingers, and she tumbled backwards again.

Penny now began to suffer from cold. Her clothes, damp from perspiration, were freezing to her body.

"This is no time to be proud!" she thought. "I'll have to shout for help and hope Winkey hears me. He's the last person in the world I'd ask voluntarily, but if he doesn't help me, I may be trapped here hours! I could freeze to death!"

Penny shouted for help and was alarmed by the sound of her own voice. Not only was it weak, but it seemed smothered by the walls of the crevasse. She knew the cry would not carry far.

But as she drew a deep breath preparatory to shouting again, she heard voices only a short distance away.

Her first thought was that her cry for help had been heard and someone was coming to her aid.

The next instant she knew better. Those who approached were arguing violently.

"You stole the wood from my land!" she heard the accuser shout. "I saw you pile it on your sled, and you're carrying it away now!"

Penny recognized the gruff voice of Vernon Eckenrod and guessed that he was talking to Winkey. Evidently the two were coming closer, for their argument was waxing louder.

Forgetting her own predicament, Penny listened

intently. The pair were now almost at the brink of the crevasse.

"Say something!" Eckenrod roared. "What excuse have you got for stealing my wood?"

"Button your lip!" Winkey retorted. "The boss told me to get some wood for the fires at the monastery. So I done it."

"He told you to steal, did he?"

"You'll git your money."

"Money isn't the point! I cut that wood myself from my own land, and I want it for my own use! Here, give me that sled! You're hauling it straight back where you got it!"

"Keep your hands off!"

Penny heard the sound of scuffling, and then above her, at the mouth of the crevasse, she saw the two men struggling.

"Look out!" she called.

Startled by her voice, Eckenrod turned and looked down. At that instant, when he was off guard, the hunchback struck him. Reeling backwards, the artist tried to recover balance and could not. With a shriek of fright and rage, he fell into the chasm.

Penny attempted to break the man's fall with her body. She was not quick enough, and he rolled to the very bottom, ending up on a pile of broken skis. There he lay groaning.

If Penny had expected that Winkey would be

aghast at his brutal act, she was to learn otherwise.

"That'll teach you!" he shouted in glee. "Don't never accuse me of stealing!"

"Help us out!" Penny called.

She knew Winkey heard her, for he stopped short and peered down into the crevasse to see who had appealed for help. Giving no sign he had seen her, he then disappeared.

"Maybe he's going for a rope!" Penny thought. "But I'd quicker think he's deserting us!"

Now thoroughly alarmed, the girl crept over the slippery ice to Vernon Eckenrod's side. He was conscious but stunned. Blood gushed from a cut on the back of his head and one leg remained crumpled beneath him.

With a handkerchief, Penny attempted to stop the flow of blood. She was relieved to note that the wound was a superficial one.

"Try to sit up," the girl urged. "If you lie on the ice your clothes will soon freeze fast."

Eckenrod's eyes opened and he stared blankly at her.

"Who are you?" he muttered. "How did you get down here?"

"I fell, the same as you. I'm Penny Parker, the girl you met yesterday at the monastery."

With her help, the artist pulled himself up on an elbow.

"I remember you now," he mumbled. "Did you see that hunchback push me down here?"

"Yes, I did. It was a brutal thing to do. I think now he may have gone for a rope."

"Don't you believe it!" Eckenrod said bitterly. "He wouldn't help us if we were freezing to death! The man is a thief! He was stealing my wood! I'll have the law on him!"

"First we have to get out of here," Penny reminded him. "That's not going to be easy."

Eckenrod became sober as he studied the sharp walls of the crevasse. The only possible handhold was a ledge well above their heads.

"If you can boost me up, I think I can make it," Penny said. "Then I'll go for help."

Eckenrod attempted to get to his feet, but his left leg crumbled beneath him. Pain and despair were in his eyes as he gazed at his companion.

"Broken," he said. "Now we are in a fix."

Trying not to disclose fright, Penny said the only thing to do was to call for help. However, after she had shouted until she was nearly hoarse, she too was filled with despair.

"Winkey isn't coming back," she acknowledged. "And no one else is close enough to hear our cries!"

In an attempt to ease Mr. Eckenrod's pain, Penny tore strips of cloth from her underskirt, and used the broken skis to make a splint.

"There's nothing wrong with my right leg," the artist insisted. "It's good and strong. If only I could get up on it, I think I could boost you to the ledge. We've got to do something!"

"Could you really do it?" Penny asked, hope reviving.

"I've got to," the artist replied grimly. "Night's coming on. We'll freeze if we're here an hour."

With Penny's help, Mr. Eckenrod after several attempts, managed to struggle upright on his good right leg. He weaved unsteadily a moment, then ordered:

"Now onto my shoulders!"

She scrambled up, grasping the icy ledge above. It broke in her fingers.

"Hurry!" muttered Mr. Eckenrod, gritting his teeth.

With desperate haste, Penny obtained another handhold which seemed fairly firm. She could feel Mr. Eckenrod sagging beneath her. Knowing it was then or never, she heaved herself up and rolled onto the ledge. Miraculously, it held her weight.

Relieved of the burden of the girl's weight, Mr. Eckenrod collapsed on the floor of the crevasse again, moaning with pain.

"Oh, Mr. Eckenrod!" Penny was aghast.

"Go on!" he urged in a stern voice. "You can make it now! Climb on out and bring help! And be quick about it!"

CHAPTER

10

MR. ECKENROD'S SECRET

THUS URGED, Penny scrambled up the slippery, sloping side of the wall and reached the top safely.

Completely spent, she lay there a moment resting.

"Don't give up!" she called to Mr. Eckenrod. "I'll get back as fast as I can!"

The closest house was the artist's own cabin in the woods. Plunging through the big drifts, the girl pounded on the door.

Almost at once it was opened by a middle-aged woman with graying hair and alert, blue eyes. Seeing the girl's rumpled hair and snow-caked skiing suit, she immediately understood that something was wrong.

"You're Mrs. Eckenrod?" Penny gasped.

"Yes, I am. What has happened?"

"Your husband has had a bad fall and his leg may be broken! We'll need a rope and a sled."

Mrs. Eckenrod won Penny's admiration by the cool

manner with which she accepted the bad news. After the first quick intake of breath, she listened attentively as Penny told her what had happened.

"You'll find a long rope in the shed," she directed.

"And a sled?"

"The only one we have is a very small one my grandchildren use when they come here to play. It will have to do. You'll find it in the shed too. While you're getting the things, I'll telephone a doctor to come right out!"

"We'll need a man to help us!"

"No one lives within miles except those folks who moved into the monastery."

"We'll get no help from there!" Penny said bitterly.

"I'll call Riverview for men!"

"We don't dare wait, Mrs. Eckenrod. Your husband is half frozen now. We'll have to get him out ourselves somehow."

"If we must, we can," replied the woman quietly. "I'll telephone the doctor and be with you in a moment."

On her way to the shed, Penny looked hopefully across the darkening hills for a glimpse of the lone skier she had seen earlier in the afternoon. He was nowhere visible.

By the time Penny had found a rope and the sled, Mrs. Eckenrod joined her. The woman had put on

a heavy coat, galoshes, and carried woolen blankets.

"How did the accident happen?" she asked, as they plodded through the drifts together.

Penny related the unfortunate argument involving the theft of firewood.

"Oh, dear! It's Vernon's dreadful temper again!" Mrs. Eckenrod exclaimed. "He is a wonderful man, but ready to quarrel if anyone crosses him!"

"In this case, I think he was in the right," Penny replied, helping her companion over a big drift. "I saw the hunchback take the wood, and I heard the argument."

"When those new people moved into the monastery, I was afraid we would have trouble with them. Something queer seems to be going on there."

"How do you mean?" Penny asked, recalling that she had expressed the identical thought at home.

"Well, the house is so quiet and deserted by day. Come night, one hears all sorts of weird noises and sees roving lights. Last night I distinctly heard a woman scream twice. It was most unnerving."

"Have you noticed anyone except the hunchback and his master leaving the building?"

"Only a young girl."

"Then I didn't imagine it!" Penny exclaimed.

Mrs. Eckenrod stared at her, puzzled by the remark.

Penny did not take time to explain, for they now

had reached the crevasse. Anxiously, the rescuers peered down into the darkening hole.

"Vernon!" his wife cried.

At sound of her voice, he stirred and sat up.

Relieved that he was still conscious, Penny stretched out prone at the lip of the crevasse. Rapidly, she lowered the rope.

"Knot it around your waist!" she instructed.

Mr. Eckenrod obeyed and with a supreme effort, got up on his good leg.

"Now up you come!" Penny shouted encouragingly. "If you can help just a little, I think we can make it."

Mrs. Eckenrod was a solidly built, strong woman. Even so, it was all the two could do to pull the artist up onto the overhanging ledge. Completely spent, he lay there for a while as his rescuers recaptured their breath. Then, the remaining distance was made with less difficulty.

Penny and Mrs. Eckenrod rolled the man onto the sled, covering him with warm blankets. Even then, their troubles were not over. To pull the sled through the drifts to the cabin, took the last of their strength.

"We did it!" Penny cried jubilantly as they made a saddle of their arms to carry the artist into the warm living room.

Mrs. Eckenrod threw a log on the fire and went to brew hot coffee. Penny sponged the blood from the artist's head but did not attempt to bandage it, knowing a doctor was on the way.

Twenty minutes later, Dr. Wallace arrived from Riverview. After carefully examining the artist's leg, he placed it in a splint and bandaged it.

"You'll be on crutches for a few days," he told Mr. Eckenrod. "The bone may be cracked, but there is no break."

"That's the best news I've heard today!" Mr. Eckenrod declared in relief. "I've got some important business to take up with a certain party!"

"Vernon!" remonstrated his wife.

After the doctor had gone, Mr. Eckenrod was put to bed on the davenport. But he refused to remain still. As the pain in his leg eased, he experimented walking with the aid of a chair.

"I'll be using my pins in three days at the latest!" he predicted. "Just as soon as I can get around, I'm going to the monastery and punch that hunchback's nose!"

"Vernon!"

"Now don't 'Vernon' me," the artist glared at his wife. "The man richly deserves it! He's a thief and bully!"

Penny gathered up her mittens which had been

drying by the hearth. "You may have trouble getting into the monastery," she remarked. "If Winkey sees you first, he'll probably lock the gate."

"You think that would stop me?"

"How else could you get in? Over the fence?"

"I know a way," the artist hinted mysteriously.

"Not another gate?"

"No."

"A secret entrance?"

Mr. Eckenrod's quick grin told Penny that her guess had been right.

"You did me a good turn today, so I'll let you into the secret," the artist said. "Help me hobble into the studio, and I'll show you something that will make your eyes pop!"

CHAPTER

11

MAP OF THE MONASTERY

"HERE, LEND me a shoulder!" Mr. Eckenrod ordered as Penny hesitated. "Or aren't you interested?"

"Oh, I am—but your leg."

"Stuff and nonsense! The doc said it wasn't broken, didn't he? I'll be walking as well as ever in a few days."

Supported on one side by Penny and on the other by his wife, the artist hobbled to the adjoining studio.

On easels about the room were many half completed paintings. Several fine pictures, one of the artist's wife, hung on the walls. A paint-smeared smock had been draped carelessly over a statue.

"Vernon," sighed his wife, reaching to retrieve the garment, "you are so untidy."

"Without you, my dear, I should live like a pig in a sty and revel in it," chuckled the artist.

At a desk, amid a litter of letters and papers, were several large sheets of yellowed drawings.

"These are the original plans of the monastery," Mr. Eckenrod said, placing them in Penny's hands. "They show every detail of the old building before it was remodeled by later owners."

"How did you get these plans, Mr. Eckenrod?"

"The present owner of the building let me have them to study at the time I planned to buy the property. He would have sold the place to me too if that soft-talking fellow who calls himself Father Benedict hadn't come along!"

"Vernon, you mustn't speak that way of him!" reprimanded his wife in a shocked tone. "I'm sure he's a good, kind man of religion. Just because you had a quarrel with his servant—"

"Father Benedict has less religion than I've got in my little finger!" the artist growled. "You said yourself only last night that something's wrong at the place! What of those screams we heard?"

"It was explained to me that a simple-minded woman named Julia works at the monastery," Penny volunteered. "She is supposed to be easily upset."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Eckenrod. "All I can say is, Father Benedict surrounds himself with mighty queer people."

"It's really none of our affair, Vernon," said his wife mildly.

"What goes on there is my business until the paintings are finished! But Father Benedict and ten hunch-

backs can't keep me away! With these plans I can always outwit them!"

"What do they show?" Penny could not make much from the dim lines.

"The building is built on the pattern of Sherborne in England," Mr. Eckenrod explained. He pointed out the main part of the church with nave, south and north transepts, choir and chapel. "This section is a ruin now, but could be restored. Unfortunately, the roof has caved in and all paintings and statues were long ago destroyed."

"Show me the cloister," requested Penny.

"Here it is." The artist pointed with a stubby thumb. "Passages radiate from it. One leads to the old chapter house. North of the cloister is the refectory, used as a dining room. Behind is the abbey's kitchen."

"The sleeping rooms?"

"They're above the refectory and also to the west of the cloister. Under the refectory are the cellars. They also extend beneath the old chapel."

"Have you ever visited them, Mr. Eckenrod?"

"The cellars? I have. Also the burial crypt. A few of the old tombs remain in fairly good state of preservation."

"But where is the secret passageway?" asked Penny.

"Through the crypt. It leads into the churchyard to the west of the building."

"Do many people know about it?"

"I rather think I'm the only one. The building owner never bothered to study the plans, because he wasn't interested. Father Benedict may have learned the secret, but if so, he stumbled onto it by accident."

"Is the passageway well hidden?"

"Very cleverly. From the churchyard, one enters an empty tomb above ground. A passageway leads down to the crypt beneath the old chapel."

"Not a very pleasant way to enter or leave a building," said Penny with a shudder.

"But convenient in a pinch," chuckled Mr. Eckenrod. "If Father Benedict is stubborn about allowing me inside, I'll bide my time and slip in to finish my paintings one of these days when he is away."

Poring intently over the plans, Penny remarked that she would like to explore the passageway sometime.

"Wait a few days until my leg is strong and I'll take you through!" the artist offered.

"And if Father Benedict should catch us?"

"We can handle him!"

"Vernon, you shouldn't put Miss Parker up to such tricks!" his wife protested. "When it comes to playing pranks, or getting even with folks, you're just like a child!"

"It was no child's play pushing me into the crevasse!" the artist exclaimed. "As soon as I can

hobble to town, I'll swear out a warrant for that hunchback's arrest!"

"And involve us in an endless feud with our neighbors," his wife sighed. "Vernon, you must forget it!"

The discussion was brought to an abrupt end by Penny who declared that she must leave immediately. The Eckenrods thanked her again for her timely assistance, urging her to visit them again soon.

"Don't forget our date!" the artist added with a chuckle. "I'll be walking in a day or two. Then we'll explore the crypt."

"I'll not forget," promised Penny.

Shadows were deepening into early darkness as she set off across the fields, guided by a flashlight Mrs. Eckenrod insisted she take.

The motor of her car was cold, the oil heavy. After two attempts she started it and soon was entering the outskirts of Riverview.

"Wonder if Dad's still at the office?" she thought. "If he is, I may as well give him a lift home."

By the time Penny had parked and climbed the stairs to the *Star* editorial room, the hands of her wristwatch were nosing six o'clock.

The first edition had rolled from the presses, and reporters, their feet on the desks, were relaxing for a few minutes.

Mr. DeWitt, the city editor, sat scanning the paper,

noting corrections or changes to be made in the next edition.

"Hi, Mr. DeWitt!" Penny greeted him as she paused by the desk. "Dad here?"

"Hello there, Penny," the editor smiled at her. "He was a minute ago. Yes, here he comes now."

Mr. DeWitt jerked his head sideways toward the publisher's private office. Mr. Parker had on his hat and topcoat and would have left by the rear exit without having seen Penny had she not overtaken him.

"Want a lift home, Dad?" she inquired.

"Why, hello, Penny!" he said, pausing in surprise. "I certainly do. I left my car at home today."

Beside them, an unhooded Western Union teletype bell began to ring insistently.

"What's that for?" Penny inquired curiously.

"An incoming telegram," her father explained. "We have a direct wire with the Western Union office now. It saves sending so many messenger boys back and forth."

The carriage of the machine began to move and the telegram was typed on the long roll of yellow copy paper.

"Why, it's for you, Dad!" Penny said in surprise. "A wire from Chicago."

"Chicago?" Mr. Parker repeated. "Guess we'd better wait and see whom it's from. By the way, how

did you and Mr. Ayling make out this afternoon at the monastery?"

"I haven't seen him since yesterday, Dad. When I went to the hotel to meet him, he wasn't there."

"Busy with other matters perhaps."

"I suppose so," Penny agreed, "but he might have notified me. He missed a lot of excitement by not going along."

Before she could tell her father about the skiing accident, the teletype message was completed. Mr. Parker ripped it from the machine. He whistled softly.

"Why, this wire is from Mr. Ayling!"

"Then he's in Chicago!"

"Apparently so. Listen to his message: "CALLED HERE UNEXPECTEDLY BY TELEGRAM SIGNED MRS. HAWTHORNE. TELEGRAM PROVED A FAKE. RETURNING TO RIVERVIEW IMMEDIATELY TO RESUME SEARCH."

CHAPTER

12

THE LOCKED DOOR

"WELL, WHAT d'you know!" Penny exclaimed as she peered over her father's shoulder to reread the telegram. "So that explains why Mr. Ayling didn't meet me today!"

"If he takes the first train back, he should get in early tomorrow," her father said. "I wonder who tricked him into going to Chicago?"

"Whoever did it probably figured he'd give up the search for Mrs. Hawthorne in disgust," Penny added excitedly. "Dad, this case is getting more interesting every minute!"

Mr. Parker smiled but made no comment as he pocketed the telegram. Together he and Penny went downstairs to the waiting car.

"Maybe I could help Mr. Ayling by inquiring around the city if anyone has seen Mrs. Hawthorne or her granddaughter," Penny suggested as she drove with skill through dense downtown traffic.

"I thought Mr. Ayling checked all hotels."

"Only the larger ones, I imagine. Anyhow, I might run into interesting information."

"Go ahead, if you like," her father encouraged her.

Early the next morning, Penny set off alone to visit a dozen hotels. At none of them had anyone by the name of Hawthorne registered.

"She may have used an assumed name," Penny thought, a trifle discouraged. "In that case, I'll never find her."

Hopeful that Mr. Ayling might arrive on the morning train, she went to the Union Railroad Station. Among those waiting on the platform for the incoming Chicago Express was Winkey, the hunchback.

He did not see Penny, and in the large crowd, she soon lost sight of him.

Finally, the train pulled in. But Mr. Ayling did not alight from either the coaches or pullmans. Feeling even more depressed, Penny went home for lunch.

Several times during the afternoon, she telephoned Mr. Ayling's hotel to inquire if he had arrived. Each time she was told he had not checked in.

"Wonder what's keeping him in Chicago?" Penny mused. "I hope he didn't change his mind about coming back here."

Throughout the day, she kept thinking about the monastery and its strange occupants. The skiing incident of the previous afternoon had convinced her

that Winkey at least was cruel and dishonest. As to Father Benedict's character, she could not make up her mind.

"Possibly he doesn't know how surly and mean his servant acts," she thought. "Someone ought to tell him!"

Penny longed to return to the monastery, but hesitated to go there for the deliberate purpose of reporting Winkey's misbehavior.

"Mr. Ayling may return here tomorrow," she told herself. "Then perhaps we can drive out there together."

However, a check of the Riverview Hotel the following morning, disclosed that the investigator still had not arrived in the city.

Decidedly mystified by his failure to return, Penny clomped into the Parker kitchen after having spent an hour downtown. To her surprise she saw that during her absence a bulky package had been delivered.

"It came for you a half hour ago," Mrs. Weems explained.

"For me! Must be a mistake. I've ordered nothing from any store."

Plainly the package bore her name, so she tore off the heavy wrappings. Inside was a pair of new hickory skis.

"Dad must have sent them!" she exclaimed. "Just what I need."

However, the skis were not from her father. Among the wrappings she found a card with Mr. Eckenrod's name.

"Try these for size," the artist had scrawled in an almost illegible hand. "Thanks for pulling me out of a hole! My leg is mending rapidly, so don't forget our date!"

"Oh, the darling!" Penny cried. "Mighty decent of him to replace the skis I broke! Only I'm afraid I won't get to use them many times. It's thawing fast today."

Slipping her slim ankles through the leather bindings, she glided awkwardly about the polished linoleum.

"How soon's luncheon?" she asked impatiently. "I want to go skiing right away!"

"I'll put it on after I've telephoned Jake Cotton," the housekeeper promised. "He failed to show up here today."

"Jake Cotton, the carpenter?"

"Yes, your father ordered another bookcase for the den. Jake promised to build it last week. He's always putting other jobs ahead."

After telephoning, Mrs. Weems toasted sandwiches and made hot chocolate. Penny ate rapidly, as was her habit when thinking of other matters.

"You won't need any help with the dishes," she said hopefully when the meal was over."

"No, run along and ski," Mrs. Weems smiled. "In spirit you're already out there on the hills!"

Penny changed quickly into skiing outfit and telephoned Louise Sidell, inviting her to go along.

"Okay," her chum agreed half-heartedly, "but I'm still lame from the last time."

By the time the girls reached the hills near the Abbington Monastery, the weather had turned discouragingly warm.

Touring over the slopes, they discarded first their mittens, then their jackets. After Louise had fallen down several times, soaking her clothes in melted snow, she proposed that they abandon the sport.

"So early in the afternoon?" Penny protested. "Oh, we can't go home yet!"

"Then let's try something else. It's no fun skiing today."

Penny's gaze fastened speculatively upon the distant chimneys of the old monastery visible through the pine trees. "I have it, Lou!" she exclaimed.

"We're not going there!" cried Louise, reading the thought.

"Why not?" Already Penny was removing her skis. "I haven't learned half what I want to know about that place and the people who live there."

"It gives me the shivers to go near the property. Anyhow, that old hunchback never will let us inside!"

"Why don't we try, just for luck? Come on, Lou, at least we can talk to him."

Much against her will, Louise was induced to accompany Penny to the big grilled gate.

To their surprise, it stood slightly ajar as if in invitation for them to enter. The front grounds were deserted and so was the gatehouse.

"We're in luck!" chuckled Penny. "Winkey's gone off somewhere."

Louise's feet were reluctant as she followed her chum to the entrance door of the monastery. "Please—" she whispered, but already Penny had thumped the lion's head knocker against the brass plate.

Several moments elapsed and then a peephole panel just above their heads shot open. Old Julia, in white lace cap, her eyes dilated with wonder or fear, peered out at them.

Her lips moved in a gibberish they could not understand.

"She's telling us to go away!" Louise decided quickly. "And that's what we're doing!"

"No! Wait!" Penny held tight to her chum's arm. "Someone else is coming now."

Even as she spoke, the door opened and Father Benedict towered above them in his impressive robes.

"Yes?" he inquired. The word was mildly spoken but with no cordiality.

"Good afternoon, Father," said Penny brightly. "I hope you don't mind our coming here again. We're deeply interested in the work you're doing and would like to learn more about the cult."

"A story for newspaper publication?"

"Oh, no!" Penny assured him, reading displeasure in his eyes. "We're just interested on general principles. No one sent us."

The monk relaxed slightly but still did not invite the girls in. "I am very busy today," he said. "Perhaps another time—"

"Oh, but we'll be in school after this weekend, Father."

"We are preparing for a ceremonial to be held in the cloister," Father Benedict frowned. "I deeply regret—"

"Oh, a ceremonial!" Penny interrupted eagerly. "May we see it?"

"That is not allowed. Only members of our cult may take part or observe."

"Well, at least you don't mind if we come in and warm ourselves at your hospitable fire," Penny said, determined not to be turned away. "Since the organization is devoted to charity, shouldn't it begin with a couple of school girls?"

Father Benedict's thin lips cracked into a slight smile.

"My observation would lead me to believe that the

day is a warm one and that neither of you are suffering from frost-bite. However, I admire perseverance and it shall be rewarded. You may come in—though only for a short while."

"Oh, thank you, Father!" Penny exclaimed, rather astonished by the decision.

In her eagerness to enter, she nearly stumbled over Old Julia, who huddled by the wall just inside the door. Angrily, the monk glared at his servant.

"Keep from underfoot, Julia!" he ordered. "Begone to the kitchen!"

The old woman, with a frightened glance directed at Louise and Penny, scurried away.

Once inside, the girls could understand why visitors were not welcome, for little had been done to make the place habitable since Penny's previous visit.

Through chilly halls the monk conducted the girls to the study beyond the cloister. There he motioned them to footstools before the fire. On the hearth a large log which Penny suspected had come from the Eckenrod property, had burned down to a cherry mass of coals.

"Now, suppose you tell me what you actually came here to learn?" Father Benedict asked, looking hard at Penny.

The abrupt question caught her slightly off guard. She could think of no ready reply. As she debated whether or not to tell him of Winkey's fight with

Mr. Eckenrod, footsteps pounded down the corridor.

Suddenly the study door was flung open. The hunchback stood there, breathing hard from having hurried so fast.

"Come quick!" he said tersely to the monk.

"What's wrong, Winkey?"

"Trouble below!"

Preparing to follow the hunchback, Father Benedict briefly made his excuses to the girls. "I'll be gone only a minute," he said. "Warm yourselves until my return."

After the door had closed behind the pair, Penny said in a low tone: "Wonder what's up? So far as I know, the only rooms below are the storage cellars and crypt."

"Maybe some of the dead bodies are coming to life!" Louise joked feebly. "I hate this place worse every minute."

She arose and wandered slowly about the room. "Somehow, the air is oppressive. I feel as if doom were about to descend upon me!"

"Nerves!" chuckled Penny.

Louise paused beside the crystal ball. "What's this thing?" she asked suspiciously.

"Only Father Benedict's crystal globe. Take a look and see what's doing in the cellar!"

"You're joking!"

"Guess I am," Penny agreed. Arising, she joined

Louise and for a long moment peered intently into the depths of the crystal ball. Seeing nothing in the glass she muttered in disgust: "Bunk!"

"How does one reach the basement and crypt?" Louise inquired.

"According to a plan I saw at Mr. Eckenrod's, a stairway leads down from the far end of the cloister. Say! Why not do a little exploring while Father Benedict is away?"

"He wouldn't like it."

"We'll never have a better chance." Crossing the room in long strides, Penny tried to open the door.

The knob turned readily, but the door would not open.

"Lou," she exclaimed in dismay, "Father Benedict certainly played a nice trick on us! We're locked in!"

CHAPTER

13

OLD JULIA'S WARNING

BADLY FRIGHTENED, Louise came quickly to her chum's side.

"Are you sure the door is locked?" she asked nervously. "Maybe it's only stuck."

"It's locked all right. We'll do no exploring today."

"Let's scream for help! We've got to get out of here!"

"Father Benedict is in the basement and wouldn't hear us," Penny said.

"And he may have locked us in on purpose too! But I heard no key turn in the lock."

"Neither did I."

"The door may have an automatic catch."

"Probably that's so," Penny agreed to keep her chum from worrying. "Father Benedict should be back soon. Let's not let him know we even noticed the door was locked."

"Do you think he fastened it on purpose?"

"He may have," Penny said slowly. "Perhaps he

didn't want us to wander about the monastery while he was gone."

"What if he doesn't come back?"

"He will, my pet. Now do stop worrying! The smart thing for us to do, is to learn what we can while we're here."

"A lot we can learn locked up in this stuffy room!"

Without replying, Penny wandered about the room, scrutinizing art objects and each piece of furniture.

"For a man who professes to live a life of poverty, Father Benedict shows quite a liking for luxury items," she remarked.

Coming to a battered desk cluttered with papers, she paused and eyed it thoughtfully.

"Penny, we wouldn't dare pry!" exclaimed Louise, guessing what was in her chum's mind.

"I suppose not," sighed Penny, "only I'm sure Mr. Ayling would do it if he were here. Those papers in the pigeon holes look as though they're unpaid bills—a whole stack of them too!"

On the desk lay an open account book and the girl gazed at it with keen interest. A long list of names had been written in ink. On one side of the ledger was a column marked "Contributions."

"Penny, you are snooping!" accused Louise, but she added with an excited laugh: "If you find anything worth while, let me know!"

"Then consider yourself officially notified!"

Startled, Louise went quickly to the desk. "What have you found?" she demanded.

Penny showed her the book in which were listed many names.

"This looks like a report covering donations made by cult members to the society!" she declared. "Do you suppose Mrs. Hawthorne's name is here?"

Hurriedly the girls examined the tiny ledger. First on the list was a Mrs. Carl Kingsley, who had contributed two diamond clips at estimated value of $650.

"Ever hear of her?" Penny asked, for the name was unfamiliar.

"Never. She may not be from Riverview."

Rapidly they scanned the entire list. There were many names, all of women. Contributions included cash, pearls, silver bracelets, gold wrist watches, an emerald pin, and other articles of jewelry.

However, the girls could not find Mrs. Hawthorne's name, nor that of her granddaughter.

"This list doesn't prove anything one way or the other," Penny said, carefully replacing the ledger on the desk where she had found it. "Mrs. Hawthorne could have joined the cult under a different name. Father Benedict might not even know who she is."

"Oh, Penny!" teased her companion. "You want to uncover a mystery so badly! Actually, there's not one bit of evidence that Mrs. Hawthorne ever came here."

"True," Penny acknowledged in a low tone, "but you will admit a lot of queer things have happened. For instance, who sent Mr. Ayling the fake telegram? And why hasn't he returned to Riverview as he said he would?"

"He's hardly had time yet. Anyway, what connection could his absence have with this monastery?"

"None, perhaps. Unless Mrs. Hawthorne should be here—"

"Oh, Penny! Father Benedict denied that she was, didn't he?"

"Yes, but that crystal ball reading he gave for Mr. Ayling's benefit was a strange affair. And Lou! The worst was, *he predicted harm would befall him!* Maybe it has!"

"So you're superstitious! Do you really believe in those crystal ball readings?"

"No, I'm not!" Penny denied hotly. "Not for a minute do I put any faith in that crystal ball! But—"

"Mr. Ayling is delayed in Chicago, so you start to worry," completed Louise. "Penny, you're certainly building up a case!"

"Maybe I am," Penny admitted with a shrug. "However, other things bother me too."

"For instance?"

"That scream we heard at midnight. Mr. Eckenrod and his wife told me they had been awakened by strange noises here."

"Didn't you understand from Father Benedict that Old Julia causes the commotion?"

"Yes, and it's plain to see she is a poor demented creature. Still, there's something about her—when we came in today, I had a feeling that she was trying to tell us something."

"She did warn us away. However, in her condition she might say anything. So I dismissed it."

"I wish I could talk to Old Julia when Father Benedict isn't around," Penny said soberly. "I have a hunch she could tell us interesting things about this place!"

"Then you do distrust Father Benedict!"

"Not exactly," Penny denied. "He's been pleasant enough to us, and I suppose he has a perfect right to start a crazy cult here if he chooses."

"It's not only crazy but profitable," Louise reminded her. "Those contributions listed total up to several thousand dollars!"

"According to Father Benedict, the money goes to charity. But what charity? It's a cinch he isn't spending much in supporting the members of his cult. This building is as barren as a barn, and I've not seen any supplies come into the place while we've been around!"

"And where are the cult members?"

"They must stay in their rooms."

"A fine life!"

"I'm sure there are people in this household who aren't listed in the ledger," Penny resumed thoughtfully. "For instance, that girl I saw when I came here with Mr. Ayling. Who is she, and where does she keep herself?"

"Why not ask Father Benedict—that is, if we ever get out of here."

"I can't quite bring myself to do it, Lou. If ever I started asking questions, I wouldn't know where to stop."

"There's only one that bothers me," Louise said, roving toward the door. "How are we going to get out of here? Let's call for help!"

"Okay," Penny agreed reluctantly. "I hate to do it though."

First testing the door again to be certain it was locked and not stuck, she pounded with her fists on the heavy oak paneling.

"Let us out!" Louise called loudly. "Let us out! We're locked in!"

"That ought to fetch someone!" chuckled Penny. "Listen! I think I hear footsteps now."

From down the corridor, the girls detected a soft patter and a creaking of boards. To attract attention to their plight, they again pounded on the oaken panel.

The footsteps approached the door and halted. Penny, her ear pressed to the panel, could hear the sound of breathing on the other side.

"Let us out!" she called. "We're locked in here!"

"Sh!" came the loud hiss.

"It must be Old Julia!" Penny whispered to Louise. "Do you suppose she'll have sense enough to help us?"

"I doubt it," Louise muttered, resigning herself to a long wait in the monk's study. "Maybe we can get across to her the idea that she should bring Father Benedict here."

"Listen, Julia," Penny began, speaking slowly and as clearly as she could. "We're locked in here and we need help. Can you bring your master?"

"No! No!" came the sharp answer.

"Then unlock the door," Penny urged.

"Key gone," the old woman mumbled.

"Can't you find it? Don't you know where your master keeps them?"

There was no answer, but the girls heard the old woman scurry away.

"Has she gone to find a key, or has she just gone?" Louise sighed. "Father Benedict probably still is in the basement with Winkey, so we can expect no help from that quarter."

Impatiently, Penny glanced at her wrist watch. Actually, they had been locked in the room less than twenty minutes, but it seemed three times that long.

"It's useless!" Louise said, seating herself by the fire again. "We're trapped here until Father Benedict gets around to letting us out!"

At the door, Penny's keen ears detected sound. Again the pad, pad of footsteps!

"Old Julia's coming back!" she exclaimed. "Maybe she's not as stupid as we thought!"

Anxiously the girls waited. To their great relief, they heard a key turn in the lock. Then, an inch at a time, the door was pushed open.

Old Julia, her eyes wild, and hair streaming down her face, stared blankly in at them.

"Thanks, Julia!" said Penny. She tried to touch the woman's hand in a gesture of friendship, only to have her shrink back.

"Why, we won't hurt you," Penny attempted to sooth her.

"Go!" the woman mumbled, her cracked lips quivering. "Go!"

Seeing us here always seems to upset her, Penny thought. Aloud she remarked: "Yes, we're leaving now. If Father Benedict wonders what became of us, I'm afraid he'll just have to guess."

The girls started toward the cloister with Old Julia following a step behind.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she muttered. "No time!"

"Oh, we have plenty of time, if that's what you mean," replied Penny, smiling at her in a friendly way. Suddenly she halted as the thought occurred to her that she might obtain useful information from the woman if only she phrased her questions skillfully.

"Julia, you must know everyone who lives here in the dormitory rooms," she began. "Do you often see a girl about my age?"

A strange light flickered for a moment in the old woman's watery gray eyes, then died. She merely stared at Penny.

"No soap!" commented Louise. "Let's get out of here."

Penny, however, was persistent.

"Julia, you must have seen her—a girl like me," she emphasized. "Does she sleep here?"

"Sleep—sleep—" the word seemingly had aroused an unpleasant chain of thought in the old woman's twisted mind.

"Where is the girl's room?" Penny probed.

Julia did not act as if she had heard the question. She was mumbling to herself, a look of horror upon her face.

"What's she saying?" Louise demanded, unable to catch a word.

Penny bent closer. Distinctly she heard the old woman mutter: "The canopied bed! In the chapel room—"

Then old Julia stiffened and she flattened herself against the wall of the passageway, her eyes wide with fear.

Directly ahead, in the doorway opening onto the cloister, stood Father Benedict.

CHAPTER

14

AN ASSIGNMENT FOR PENNY

FATHER BENEDICT'S face was as expressionless as a marble statue, but his dark eyes smoldered with anger.

Ignoring Penny and Louise for the moment, he fixed the cringing Julia with stern gaze.

"Did I not order you to remain in the kitchen?" he demanded. His voice was low, almost purring. Nevertheless, the woman acted as if she had been lashed with a whip.

Mumbling unintelligibly, she scurried off down the covered passageway along the side of the cloister, and disappeared through another doorway.

"Please, it wasn't Julia's fault that she was here," said Penny, feeling sorry for the unfortunate woman. "Louise and I called for help and she came to assist us."

"Yes, we were locked in the study," added Louise. "If she hadn't come to our rescue, we would have been there yet."

"Do I understand you to say you were *locked* in?" asked the monk, his shaggy eyebrows lifting in astonishment. "The door sticks sometimes."

"It was locked," interposed Penny quietly. "We tried several times to open it. Julia finally let us out with a key."

Having divulged this bit of information, she immediately regretted it. A shadow passed over the monk's countenance.

"A key?" he repeated. "How would Julia know—" Breaking off, he smiled and completed: "The locks here are very old and sadly in need of repair. I must have a locksmith in immediately."

Father Benedict fixed his gaze upon one of the twisted, weather-stained columns of the cloister, for the moment seeming to forget the girls. Becoming a little uncomfortable, they edged toward the exit.

"We'll be going now," said Penny to remind him of their presence. "That is, unless you'll permit us to witness the cult ceremony."

"The main hall has not yet been prepared," Father Benedict replied quickly. "We have postponed the ceremony until later tonight."

"Perhaps we could return then."

"It would be highly inadvisable." Father Benedict's deep frown plainly showed that he was becoming irritated. "The members of our sect are sensitive to visitors. I regret onlookers are not as yet welcome."

That's telling me in a nice way to mind my own business, thought Penny. Aloud she said: "I see. Well, later on, perhaps."

Politely, Father Benedict escorted the girls through the cloister. Penny noted that much of the dirt and debris had been swept away. A beautifully carved stone stairway, which she had failed to notice upon her previous visit, led up to a narrow balcony.

Observing that many doors opened from it, she inquired if the dormitories were above.

"They are," the monk replied in a brief tone which discouraged further questions.

"It's so still in here," remarked Louise as they walked on. "One never would dream many people are staying in the building."

"We lead a quiet life," the monk explained. "For the most part, my people spend their time reading or in meditation and prayer."

The three now had reached the front door, and Penny thought she detected an expression of relief upon Father Benedict's face as he opened it for them.

"By the way," she remarked, "was anything seriously wrong in the cellar?"

"Oh, no! Nothing at all! Merely a leaking pipe. A plumber will take care of it. Thank you, and good afternoon."

With no show of haste, but very firmly, the monk closed the door in their faces.

"Well, how do you like that!" Penny muttered. "I never received a smoother brush-off!"

Snow was melting fast and running in rivers down the brick walk as the girls sauntered toward the gate. Winkey was nowhere to be seen, but knowing he might be close by, they were careful not to discuss Father Benedict until they were well beyond the property boundaries.

"Well, I guess this puts an end to your visits here," remarked Louise as they walked toward the parked car. "Father Benedict seems determined not to let you witness one of the cult ceremonies."

"Which makes me all the more determined to see one!"

"I have a hunch he'll turn you away if you call at the monastery again. Why don't you forget the place, Penny?"

"I should say not! I have an idea—it just came to me!"

"I suppose you'll sneak back at night or something equally as dramatic," teased Louise.

Penny plucked an icicle from a roadside bush, nibbling at it thoughtfully as she replied: "Only as a last resort. No, I'll drop in at the newspaper office and get Mr. DeWitt, the city editor, to assign me to do a feature story on the ceremony tonight. If I officially represent the *Riverview Star*, Father Benedict can't so easily turn me away."

The girls had reached the car. Stowing their skiing equipment, they motored rapidly toward the city.

"What did you think of Old Julia?" Penny inquired as they neared Louise's home. "Especially her remark about the canopied bed in the chapel?"

"Whoever heard of a bed of any kind in a chapel?" Louise scoffed. "She's dizzy, that's all."

"From a map Mr. Eckenrod showed me, I know the chapel is just off the cloister above the crypt," Penny recalled, switching on the windshield wiper to clear the glass of melting snow. "I suppose it could have been converted into a bedroom."

"I don't think her remark meant a thing. She mumbles most of the time."

"True, but the thing I noticed was that she seemed so afraid of Father Benedict. Do you suppose he abuses her?"

"Oh, Penny! A man of his calling?"

"He's not a real monk. Apparently this cult is only an order that has been in existence a short time. Father Benedict doesn't impress me as a very religious man. Furthermore, all that crystal-glass-gazing business leads me to think he's more of a charlatan than anything else!"

"Do you think he runs the place to get money?"

"I'm wondering, that's all. We know he accepts very liberal contributions from his converts. Where does the money go?"

"If I were certain he locked us in that room today, I'd believe the worst!" Louise declared as the car stopped in front of the Sidell home. Opening the door to alight, she added: "He put up a good story though. I guess it must have been an accident."

Penny made no reply.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow," Louise bade her goodbye. "If you arrange to see one of the cult ceremonies, be sure to let me know."

The afternoon now was late. Penny drove to the *Riverview Star* building. Girls who worked in the downstairs business office were leaving for the day, but upstairs the editorial staff was just swinging into action for a busy night.

At the city editor's desk a short wave radio blared routine police calls. Editor DeWitt, an eyeshade pulled low over his eyes, scowled as he rapidly scanned copy.

Seeing Penny, he looked up and smiled, which was the signal for her to explain the purpose of her call.

Going straight to the point, she asked to be assigned a feature story on the cult ceremony that night in the monastery.

"Think you can get it?" he demanded gruffly.

"Why not?"

"Two of our reporters already have failed. The high monkey-monk out there won't allow any of our men in the building."

"Then you'd like a story?"

"Sure. We're interested in what's going on out there." Mr. DeWitt slashed a page of corrected copy in half with his long scissors. He dropped one section onto the floor and the other into the copy basket. "Learn anything worth while out there today?"

"Nothing worthy of print. If you'll assign me to the story I'll go back tonight. I think I can get inside again."

"Okay, give me a ring if you run into anything interesting. Your father know you're going?"

"Well, I haven't told him yet."

"Be sure you do," said Mr. DeWitt, looking her straight in the eyes. "I don't want to find myself sitting behind the eight ball!"

"Oh, I'll let Dad know," Penny assured him hastily. "I'll do it now."

However, her father was in conference, so after waiting around the office a little while, she decided to talk the matter over with him when he came home for dinner.

In the elevator, leaving the office, Penny ran into Jerry Livingston. Hearing of the assignment, he looked a little worried.

"Think you ought to go out to the monastery alone at night?" he inquired.

"I don't see why not, Jerry."

"I've not met Father Benedict myself," Jerry said,

"but one of our reporters who was out there yesterday, didn't like his appearance. I'll bet a cent your father refuses to let you go."

"I hope not," Penny said anxiously. "I'll put up a big argument."

"What time you leaving?" Jerry asked as the elevator let them out on the main floor.

"Early. Maybe around seven o'clock."

"Well, good luck," Jerry said. "I suppose it's all right, or DeWitt wouldn't have given you the assignment."

Parting company with the reporter, Penny stopped briefly at the Riverview Hotel to inquire if Mr. Ayling had returned from Chicago. He had not checked in.

"Queer he doesn't come after sending that telegram," she thought. "I wonder what's delaying him?"

Arriving home a few minutes later, Penny heard the sound of pounding as she entered the kitchen. Mrs. Weems was scraping carrots at the sink.

"Did you have a good time skiing?" the housekeeper inquired.

"Fair." Penny stripped off her mittens and hung them on a radiator. "Snow's melting fast today. What's that awful pounding?"

"Jake Cotton finally came. He's building the bookcases in your father's study."

"Oh, yes," recalled Penny. "I thought from the sound the place was being torn down!"

After removing her heavy ski suit and putting her skiing equipment away, the girl wandered into the study.

Jake Cotton, a short, wiry old man, was gathering up his tools preparatory to leaving. Boards of various length were strewn over the carpet.

"Well, reckon I'll call it a day," he remarked. "It'll take me all tomorrow to finish the job. That is, if I can arrange to get back."

"You have another job?" Penny inquired.

"I've been doing a little work for them folks that moved into the monastery," the carpenter explained. "The man that owns the place pays well, but he's mighty fussy. Wants the work done the minute he says!"

"I suppose a great deal should be done out there, the building is so old."

"It's a wreck!" Jake Cotton said, picking up his tool kit. "A dozen workmen couldn't put it in liveable shape in two weeks! They want such trivial things done too, while they let more important repairs wait."

"For instance?"

"Well, the first job the monks had me do was fix the old freight lift into the cellar!"

"I didn't know the building had one," said Penny in surprise. "Is it on the first floor?"

"In the old chapel room off the cloister," Jake explained. "Least, that's what I took it to be. They're

using it for a bedroom now. I ask you, what would any sensible person want with a freight lift in a bedroom?"

"It does seem unusual. Why was it originally installed in the chapel?"

"I heard it was done when the building was built," Mr. Cotton told her. "Years ago, they had burial services in the chapel, and caskets were lowered to the crypt below."

"How does the lift operate?"

"It's just a section of flooring that lowers when the machinery is turned on," the carpenter explained. "With a carpet over the boards, you wouldn't know it was there."

"And for what purpose is it to be used now?"

Mr. Cotton had started for the doorway. Penny trailed him to the front porch, eager to learn more.

"I couldn't figure out what the new owners aim to do with the lift," the carpenter replied, pausing on the steps. "Reckon they'll use it to lower heavy luggage and maybe unwanted furniture into the basement for storage."

"Did you see the crypt?"

"Didn't get down there. The monk had his own man, a hunchback, oil up the machinery and put it in working order. I only repaired the flooring."

"So the room is used as a bedroom now?"

"Looked that way to me. Leastwise, I saw a big

bed in there. One of them old fashioned contraptions with a lot of dust-catching draperies over it."

"Not a canopied bed!"

"Reckon it was," Mr. Cotton answered carelessly. "Well, see you tomorrow if I'm not called back to the monastery to do another rush job! So long!"

Before the startled Penny could ask another question, he hurried off down the darkening street.

CHAPTER

15

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW

JAKE COTTON'S careless remark about the canopied bed at the monastery filled Penny with deep excitement.

"Perhaps Old Julia isn't as crazy as she seems!" she thought. "The place does have a canopied bed, and she may have been trying to tell me something about it!"

Now more than ever, Penny was determined to revisit the monastery that night. Many unanswered questions plagued her. Not only was she curious to witness a cult ceremony, but also she wished to learn the identity of the strange girl who lived on the premises. And she hoped to view the chapel room with the freight lift and if possible, to see the canopied bed of which Old Julia had prattled so unintelligibly.

Hastening into the house, Penny sought Mrs. Weems in the kitchen.

"Anything I can do to help with dinner?" she inquired.

The housekeeper, in the act of putting a kettle of potatoes on the fire to boil, eyed her with instant suspicion.

"And where do you plan to go when dinner is over, may I ask?" she inquired.

"Only out to the monastery."

"Again! You came from there not a half hour ago!"

"Oh, Mr. DeWitt assigned me to cover a cult meeting tonight," Penny assured her hastily.

"And your father approves?"

"Haven't seen him yet. He ought to be coming home any minute now."

"Your father telephoned he will be detained," Mrs. Weems explained. "I doubt he'll be home before nine o'clock. So the monastery expedition is out of the question!"

"Oh, Mrs. Weems!" Penny was aghast. "I promised Mr. DeWitt! He's depending on the story."

"That's neither here nor there," the housekeeper replied, though she softened a little. "I simply can't allow you to go to the monastery alone at night—"

"Oh, I'll start right away—just as soon as I can grab a bite of dinner," Penny broke in eagerly. "If Father Benedict refuses me permission to see the ceremony, then I can come back."

"You can, but will you?"

"Eventually, at least," Penny grinned. "Oh, Mrs. Weems, have a heart! Can't I telephone Dad somewhere?"

The housekeeper shook her head. "He's in an important meeting and can't be disturbed until it's over."

"But you will let me go? I won't be gone long."

"Oh, I suppose I'll have to give in," Mrs. Weems sighed. "I usually do. I'll hurry dinner along so you can get back early."

While the housekeeper fried pork chops, Penny set the table and prepared a salad. When the meal was ready she ate with a haste that shocked Mrs. Weems.

"I declare, your table manners become worse every day!" she protested. "Your mind isn't on what you are doing."

"It's on what I'm about to do!" Penny chuckled, getting up from the table. "I don't want any dessert tonight. See you later!"

Donning a heavy coat and slipping a flashlight into one of the deep pockets, she left the house.

The night was dark, for as yet there was no moon. Penny drove rapidly through Riverview and along the lonely road which led to the monastery.

Despite the speed of her car, she soon noted that another automobile was overtaking her. The girl pressed her foot a little more firmly on the gasoline pedal, but still the other car gained.

She was driving forty-five miles an hour when the big black car passed her traveling at least sixty. On the narrow road, Penny was crowded dangerously close to the ditch.

"The nerve of some people!" she muttered in disgust. "No wonder there are so many highway accidents!"

Penny caught only a fleeting glimpse of the black car's driver, a man hunched low over the steering wheel.

"Why, that looked like Winkey!" she thought. "And another man was with him in the front seat! I wonder if it was Father Benedict?"

Penny speeded up but found it impossible to keep the car in view. When she skidded at a curve, she wisely slowed down and abandoned the chase.

Approaching the monastery ten minutes later, the girl decided to park a short distance from the entrance gate. She left the car at the roadside beyond view of the gatehouse, and tramped on through the slush and snow.

Coming within sight of the ancient building, she paused.

The big gate stood ajar, and on the driveway stood the black automobile which had passed her car down the road.

"So it was Winkey!" she thought.

At the gateway Penny gazed carefully about the grounds. The hunchback was nowhere to be seen and the gatehouse remained deserted.

"So far, so good!" she encouraged herself. "Now if only Father Benedict doesn't refuse to let me into the house!"

Thinking over what she would say to the monk, Penny walked slowly up the driveway. Nearly all of the snow had melted, leaving large puddles to be avoided.

However, near where the black car had been parked, a section of yard was shadowed from the sun during the day. Here the damp snow remained in deep banks.

As Penny passed the car, she noticed a double set of men's footprints leading from the parked automobile toward the rear of the premises.

Also, she observed long marks which indicated the two men had dragged a heavy object over the snow.

"I suppose it was a sack of potatoes or supplies for the monastery," she mused. "It must be a job keeping this place in operation. Riverview stores never would make deliveries so far out."

Windows of the monastery were dark, though far inside the building dim lights could be seen. With a feeling akin to dread Penny went to the door and rapped with the brass knocker.

Now that she actually was embarked upon adventure, she rather regretted she had promised Mr. De-

Witt a feature story. By night the monastery seemed more austere and unfriendly.

Minutes elapsed and no one came to answer the door. Impatiently, Penny clanged the knocker several times in rapid succession. Only then did she hear approaching footsteps.

At last the big door swung outward to reveal Father Benedict. His eyes narrowed with displeasure as he saw her.

"Well?" he inquired. Penny observed that he was a little breathless from having hastened.

"I don't suppose you expected to see me here again so soon!" she began with forced gaiety. "Do you mind if I witness the cult ceremony tonight?"

"We discussed that this afternoon. I am very sorry—" Father Benedict began to close the door.

"I want to write a little story about it for the newspaper," Penny went on, talking fast. "If you'll only—"

The door closed in her face. Distinctly she heard a key grate in the lock.

"Well, how do you like that?" Penny muttered angrily. "Who does he think he is, anyhow?"

She started away, only to pause and gaze thoughtfully back at the darkened windows. To return to the newspaper office without a story would be humiliating. A good reporter never failed.

"There must be some way to see that ceremony!"

she reasoned. "Perhaps I can slip in through a rear door."

Penny circled the building, taking care to avoid snow patches where revealing footprints would be left behind. She crossed through the old church-yard with its toppled, weather-stained stones, passing close along the church wall.

Coming to a small arching door, she tried the knob.

"Locked!" she muttered in disgust. "One would think this place were a jail!"

Half way around the building Penny found another door which evidently opened into the kitchen. It too was locked.

"I'm out of luck!" she decided, losing heart.

As she turned away intending to return to her car, she noticed a window at shoulder level, opening from a kitchen wall. A ventilator screen had been inserted to permit free circulation of outside air.

Penny carefully studied the window. A crack between the screen and window frame encouraged her to hope that the mesh might be removed.

Obviously, the plan had disadvantages. In removing the screen, she might make too much noise and be detected.

Furthermore, a wide patch of snow separated her from the window. She could not reach the wall without leaving a trail of telltale footprints.

Then an idea flashed into Penny's mind. How easy it would be to make deceptive prints in the snow merely by walking *backwards!*

"If Father Benedict discovers my shoetracks, he'll think someone from inside the building crawled out the window!" she chuckled. "At least I hope he will!"

Now completely dedicated to the adventure, the girl carefully backed toward the window. She took each step slowly to make a distinct print.

Reaching the window, she tried the ventilator screen. To her delight, it folded like an accordian when she pushed one side against the edge of the window. Making no sound, she removed it.

Listening a moment to make certain no one was close by, Penny raised the window higher. Then on strong arms she swung herself up and over the ledge.

The girl found herself in a large kitchen lighted only by a smoldering log in a great cavern of a fireplace.

Rows of copper pans hung on the smoke-stained walls. In a huge black kettle, watery soup simmered over the fire.

Penny turned to close the window and stepped squarely on the tail of a drowsing cat.

"Ye-eow!" screeched the frightened animal.

Penny huddled against the wall, listening. Her

heart sank as she heard heavy fotsteps in the passageway. The howling cat had brought someone to investigate!

Frantically, the girl glanced about the room. Huge cupboards which rose from the floor to the ceiling offered the only possible hiding place in the otherwise barren kitchen.

Pulling open one of the doors, she saw an interior cluttered with greasy pans and dishes. With desperate haste, she tried the adjoining door. This cupboard was empty except for a few dusty newspapers.

Penny stepped inside, softly closing the door. Only then, as she heard someone enter the kitchen, did she realize that in her haste to hide, she had forgotten to close the window.

CHAPTER

16

THE KITCHEN CUPBOARD

INTO THE kitchen lumbered Old Julia. She picked up the whimpering cat and began to croon endearments.

Penny breathed easier. The next instant she became tense again as she heard another person enter the room.

"What was that noise, Julia?" a man demanded harshly.

Penny recognized Father Benedict's voice.

"Only the cat, Father."

"Why is the room so cold? Oh, I see! Against my orders you opened the window again!"

"No, I didn't!" Old Julia defended herself. "I hain't been near a door or window since you told me not to talk to nobody nor let 'em in. I don't talk to nobody—only Patsy, the cat. Nice Patsy!"

"You're a stupid old woman! What made the cat howl?"

"I dunno. She must've seen a mouse."

"Cats don't howl unless they are hurt! You opened the window!"

"No! No! I didn't!" the old woman cried. "Don't strike me! I'm telling you the truth."

Penny heard the monk walk to the window. Her heart skipped a beat when he said: "Perhaps you are, Julia! I can see footprints in the snow! Someone crawled out through this window! You helped that girl get away!"

"I didn't! I didn't!" whimpered Julia. "I dunno how the window got open."

The monk seemed to be talking to himself as he went on: "I knew that girl would make trouble the minute I set eyes on her! If it hadn't been for her interference, everything would have gone just as planned! Now she'll have to pay for her folly!"

For a moment Penny thought Father Benedict was speaking of her. Then it came to her that he must be referring to the dark-haired girl she had seen briefly on the day of her first visit to the monastery.

"This isn't the only time she's slipped out of here!" the monk went on angrily. "But it will be the last!"

Father Benedict rang a bell. While waiting for it to be answered, he slammed down the kitchen window.

Soon Winkey, the hunchback, appeared. "You called me, boss?" he inquired.

"I did," said the monk. "And kindly remember not

to call me 'boss.' Father Benedict is a more respectful term."

"That's a laugh," rejoined Winkey rudely. "What did you call me for?"

"Look out the window and see for yourself."

"Footprints!"

"Going away from the monastery," Father Benedict added. "That girl has run off again! This time when she gets back, see that she is punished."

The command seemed to startle the gateman for he asked dubiously: "You don't mean—"

"I do." The monk's words dropped like chips of steel. "The usual punishment."

"But ain't it a little harsh for a girl? She's only a kid—"

"Only a kid!" Father Benedict's voice rose in mockery. "From the hour we came here she has been a thorn in my side. If it hadn't been for her interference, we would have been away from here yesterday!"

"Okay, if those are your orders. Are you sure the girl has skipped?"

"Certainly I am. I found the window open, and there are the footprints in the snow!"

"Maybe she won't be back."

"She will," Father Benedict said grimly. "You see, so long as we have her—"

He broke off to listen intently. From the direction of the cloister a silver bell had chimed.

"The signal for the processional!" Father Benedict exclaimed, interrupting himself. "I must go!"

In the doorway he apparently paused, for Penny heard him say to Julia:

"Start dishing up the soup ready to serve as soon as the ceremony is over! A bowl and four crackers to each person!"

"Is that all they're getting to eat?" Winkey inquired. "We're in for a lot of squawks!"

"You forget that the members of our sect have taken a vow of poverty and abstinence," retorted the monk with heavy sarcasm. "If there are any complaints, I know how to handle them."

"You sure do," agreed Winkey, his laughter crackling. "I'll hand you the gold plated medal for that!"

Voices of the two men died away, informing Penny that they had gone. As she huddled in the cramped quarters, she could hear Julia moving about the kitchen. The woman sighed heavily and once muttered: "Woe is me! Wisht I was dead, I do!"

Minutes elapsed and the girl became increasingly uncomfortable and impatient. Old Julia showed no inclination to leave the kitchen.

"I've got to get out of here or I'll miss the entire ceremony!" Penny told herself. "Well, here goes! If Julia screams, I'm a cooked goose!"

Opening the cupboard door a tiny crack, she peered out.

Old Julia had lighted candles. In their flickering light she could be seen with her back to Penny, stirring the soup. On the table beside her were ten wooden bowls.

"It's now or never!" the girl thought. "Julia may give me away, but I'll have to chance it!"

Opening the door wider, she moved noiselessly out and glided across the floor. A board creaked. But as Julia turned her head, Penny reached out and covered her mouth with her hand.

Seeing her, the old woman's eyes dilated with fear, but she could not speak.

"Don't try to scream! Don't say a word!" Penny warned. "I won't hurt you! I'm here to help you."

The old woman tried to break from the girl's grasp. Penny kept talking to her in a soothing tone until gradually she relaxed.

"Will you keep quiet if I release you?" she finally demanded.

The old woman's head bobbed up and down.

Penny removed her hand, expecting the worst. But Julia did not scream. Instead, she stared fixedly at the girl.

"Julia, I must see the ceremony, and Father Benedict isn't to know I am here," Penny whispered. "Will you keep my secret?"

Again Julia's head inclined, but the look of terror remained in her eyes.

"Go!" she whispered, pointing to the window. "Leave while there is time!"

"Not until I've seen the ceremony. Julia, I need a robe. Where can I find one?"

So stupidly did Julia stare at her that Penny was certain the woman did not understand. However, after a moment she shuffled to one of the storage cupboards where linen was kept. Returning with a white cotton robe, she placed in in the girl's hands.

Penny put the garment on over her coat, pulling the hood well down over her blond curls.

Then, with another whispered warning to Julia not to reveal her presence, she left the kitchen. The disguise gave her renewed confidence, for in the shadowy halls she felt that only at close range would anyone recognize her.

Three stone steps led up to the cloister. Approaching with great caution, Penny observed that it too had been lighted with candles.

In the center of the cloister near the old fountain, Father Benedict's crystal globe had been set up. On either side stood stately rows of tall candles.

Impressive as was the sight, Penny had no time to admire it, for a door had opened. Winkey came in, dragging a girl by the wrist.

With a shock Penny recognized her as the same girl she had seen while visiting the monastery with Mr. Ayling.

"And she's the same one Louise and I picked up in our car!" she thought.

The girl struggled to free herself from the hunchback's firm grasp.

"Let me go!" she cried, kicking at him. "Let me go!"

"Oh, no, you don't!" he taunted her. "This time you'll have to pay for sneaking out of the house and coming back!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the girl retorted. "I've not been out of this house tonight! If I could get away, I'd bring the police and have you arrested! You can't mistreat me! Let go my wrist!"

Before Winkey could answer, another door opened to admit Father Benedict. Walking straight toward the hunchback he exclaimed harshly:

"Fool! Don't bring her in here! The ceremony is starting! Lock her up and be quick about it!"

CHAPTER

17

THE CULT CEREMONY

AS PENNY watched from behind a pillar in the cloister, Winkey pulled the struggling girl through a doorway and out of sight.

Father Benedict then adjusted his long robe and rang a silver bell. With stately tread he retired to a position behind the crystal globe.

An instant later from the far side of the cloister, a door was flung open. A procession of ten persons in white robes moved slowly into the shadowy room.

As far as Penny could tell, all who participated were women, many of advanced age. Leaders of the strange procession carried banners embroidered in silver and gold symbols.

The white robed figures moved slowly along the passageway, and Penny saw that they would pass the pillar where she stood.

Fearing detection, she shifted position slightly to avoid being seen.

But as the mumbling, chanting group passed her, she

was overcome with a sudden impulse to join the procession.

"If I can get up close, I'll be able to hear what is said!" she thought. "Maybe I'll learn the secret of Father Benedict's strange power over these people!"

As the procession passed the pillar, Penny attached herself to the rear. With bowed head, she followed the others who formed a semicircle about the fountain.

The monk began a chant in Latin which Penny could not understand. However, his gestures were eloquent, and despite herself, she was impressed.

Presently he spoke in English, quoting the White Lady of Sir Walter Scott's "The Monastery."

> "Mortal warp and mortal woof
> Cannot brook this charmed roof;
> All that mortal art hath wrought
> In our cell returns to naught.
> The molten gold returns to clay,
> The polish'd diamond melts away;
> All is alter'd, all is flown,
> Naught stands fast but truth alone.
> Not for that thy quest give o'er;
> Courage! prove thy chance once more."

Eloquently, the monk then praised the frugal life, assuring his listeners that those who gave of their treasure to the cult society would receive untold spiritual values.

"As you file past the fountain cast your jewels into

the basin," he bade the group. "You will be rewarded three-fold."

Slowly the robed women circled the fountain. The one leading the procession dropped a bracelet. The woman following fumbled beneath her robe and reluctantly gave a cameo broach.

"It was the last gift of my dear departed husband," she whispered tearfully. "I do so dislike to part with it—"

"You shall have your reward," the monk assured her. "Later, in the crystal globe, you will see the face of your husband!"

"So that's how he rules them!" thought Penny. "He plays upon their emotions and then pretends to conjure up visions of departed relatives!"

Another woman stripped a diamond ring from her finger, and cast it into the bowl of the fountain. The one who followed her, stood empty handed.

"Where is your contribution?" demanded the monk.

"I have none, O Master! At the last ceremony, I gave all!"

"Those who have no gift for the celestial spirits receive no rewards," Father Benedict said sharply.

"Please—"

"Pass on!" ordered the monk.

Realization now came to Penny that in another moment she too would be expected to drop her contribution into the fountain. What could she give?

On her third finger the girl wore a silver colored ring with a red glass stone. She had won it several days before at a church party fish pond, and despite the fact that it obviously had been bought in a dime store, had kept it.

As Penny's turn came she removed the cheap ring and let it fall into the basin of the fountain. Keeping the hood well over her face, she mumbled in a disguised voice: "I give my precious ruby ring!"

"Blessings upon you, my good woman!" said the monk approvingly. "The celestial spirits will remember your generosity."

Father Benedict now led the procession to the refectory where supper was to be served.

The room was drafty and barren except for one long table and benches. Old Julia had set out the wooden bowls of soup, and crackers, thoughtfully remembering to set an extra one for Penny. No other food was in evidence.

"Soup again?" asked one of the cult members in bitter disappointment. "We are hungry!"

"We've had little more than soup since we came here!" exclaimed another old lady plaintively.

"Are you so soon forgetting your vows?" chided Father Benedict. "Material things have no true meaning."

Grumbling a little, the women sat down at the table and began to eat. Penny took an empty place near

the door. She tasted the soup and nearly gagged.

Father Benedict did not join the group. After lingering a few minutes he quietly slipped away. This offered Penny an opportunity to leave without arousing the monk's suspicions.

"I must learn more about that girl who is locked up here somewhere!" she thought. "Perhaps I can help her escape!"

Still wearing the white robe, Penny started back to the cloister. The cult ceremony which she had witnessed greatly disturbed her.

"Father Benedict is taking unfair advantage of these people," she told herself. "He accepts their jewels and gives nothing in return. Furthermore, he is cruel!"

Voices in the cloister directly ahead warned the girl to proceed cautiously. Keeping close to the wall and holding her robe tightly about her, she crept closer to the fountain.

The candles had all been extinguished. However, Father Benedict and Winkey were there, working by the light of a lantern.

"Fish out the jewels and be quick about it!" the monk ordered his servant. "We must be finished before they're through in the refectory."

The hunchback scrambled down into the bowl of the fountain, and groped with his hands for the trinkets the cult members had thrown away.

"Did the old lady kick in with the sapphire tonight?" Winkey asked as he worked.

"No!" the monk answered. "She sent word that she was too sick to leave her room! I suspect that girl put her up to it!"

"You goin' to let her get by with it?"

"I'll talk with her later tonight," Father Benedict said. "If she doesn't come across by tomorrow, we'll find ways to persuade her."

"You been saying that ever since she came here! If you ask me, we won't never have any luck with her until we get rid of the girl! She's been a wrench in the machinery from the start."

"I'm afraid you are correct, Winkey," sighed the monk. "But I do so dislike violence. Well, if it must be, so be it. You assigned her to the room with the canopied bed?"

"I locked her in like you said." Winkey, having gathered all of the trinkets, scrambled out of the stone basin onto the tiled cloister floor.

"What have we here?" asked the monk eagerly.

Winkey spread the contributions on a handkerchief. Father Benedict held the lantern closer to inspect the articles.

"Junk! Trash!" he exclaimed. "Only the diamond has any value."

"How about this ring?" demanded Winkey, picking up Penny's dime store contribution.

"Glass!" In fury, the monk hurled the ring across the cloister.

Penny suppressed a giggle. But Father Benedict's next words sent a shiver down her spine.

"This settles it!" he said. "I'll talk to the old lady now! If she refuses to give up the sapphire, then you know what to do with the girl!"

"I'm waiting for the chance!" growled the hunchback. "Just say when!"

"Once the girl is where she can't influence the old lady, we'll have no trouble," the monk continued. "However, we must work fast. After tonight, I have a feeling we will do well to move our institution elsewhere."

"The newspapers are sending reporters around to ask a lot of questions," agreed Winkey. "I don't like it! If anyone should find out about the crypt—"

"Let me do the worrying," interrupted Father Benedict. "We'll get the sapphire and be away before anyone even sets foot inside the place."

"What about that Parker girl?"

"She's only a child!" the monk scoffed. "A very annoying, nosey one, I grant you."

Taking the lantern with them, Father Benedict and Winkey disappeared in the direction of the monk's study. Left in darkness, Penny debated her next action.

If only she could telephone her father or Mr. DeWitt at the *Star* office! This, of course, was out of the question, for the ancient building obviously had no phone service.

"I might go for help," she reasoned, "but a full hour would be needed for me to reach Riverview and return with anyone. And what can I prove?"

Though Penny was convinced Father Benedict and Winkey were fleecing cult members, she knew the women voluntarily had given up their jewelery. In the event police tried to arrest Father Benedict, the cult members might rise to his defense.

"I'll have to have more evidence!" she decided. "The one person who should be able to tell me what goes on here is that girl who is locked in the chapel bedroom!"

Stealing across the dark cloister, Penny listened a moment at the passageway leading to the refectory. An undercurrent of conversation and the clatter of tin spoons told her that cult members had not yet finished the evening repast.

From the map Mr. Eckenrod had shown her, the girl knew the location of the chapel bedroom. Tiptoeing down a corridor opening from the cloister, she came to a massive oaken door.

"This must be the one," she decided.

Softly she tapped on the panel.

"Who is there?" called a startled voice. The words were so muffled, Penny barely could distinguish them.

"A friend," replied Penny.

Footsteps pattered across the room. "Help me get out!" the imprisoned girl pleaded.

Penny tried the door. As she had expected, it was locked.

"Where is the key?" she called through the panel. "If I can find it, I may be able to get you out of here."

"Speak louder!" the girl protested. "I can't hear you."

Penny dared raise her voice no higher. She realized that the heavy paneling deadened sound and made it impossible to carry on a satisfactory conversation.

"The key!" she called again. "Where is it?"

As she spoke the words, a board snapped directly behind her. Penny's heart jumped. Before she could turn to look over her shoulder, a bony hand reached out of the darkness and grasped her wrist.

CHAPTER

18

ELEVEN BOWLS

SMOTHERING A scream, Penny twisted around to see that it was Old Julia who had seized her arm.

"Oh!" she gasped in relief. "I thought it was Winkey or Father Benedict!"

"You go now!" the old woman urged her. "*Please!*"

"I can't until I've helped whoever is locked in here," Penny replied, gently prying away Julia's fingers which were cutting into her flesh. "Tell me, where is the key?"

Old Julia shook her head in a stupid sort of way.

"The key to this door," Penny explained patiently. "Where is it kept?"

"Father Benedict," Julia mumbled. "No other."

"Then it's impossible to help the girl without bringing police!" Penny exclaimed. "I'll have to get out of here and drive to Riverview! But can I prove anything?"

Old Julia stared blankly at Penny as if not understanding a word. But she reached out, and taking hold of the girl's hand, pulled her along the corridor.

Believing that the servant meant to show her a quick means of exit from the building, Penny willingly followed.

However, Old Julia led her only a few yards before pausing beside another door. Opening it, she motioned for Penny to step inside.

The girl saw with some misgiving that Old Julia expected her to enter what appeared to be a rather large, empty storage closet.

"Oh, I don't want to hide," Penny explained thinking that the old woman had misunderstood. "I must leave here now."

"Inside!" bade Julia insistently. "You see! Talk!"

She gave Penny a little shove into the room and closed the door.

Only then did the girl realize that she barely had escaped detection. For, in the corridor, heavy footsteps now were heard. Standing motionless against the closet door, she recognized Father Benedict's voice as he spoke to Julia:

"What are you doing here?" he asked the servant harshly. "Have I not told you never to come into this section of the building?"

Julia's reply was inaudible. The monk's next re-

mark warned Penny that she courted detection if she remained longer in the building.

"I have just come from the refectory," he said. "I counted the soup bowls. There were ten empty and one barely touched. *Who was the eleventh person in this household that was served tonight?*"

"Don't ask me," moaned Old Julia. "I dunno nothing."

"Sometimes," said the master coldly, "I am inclined to think you know far more than you let on. Get to the dishes now! Go!"

Evidently Father Benedict struck or kicked the woman, for Old Julia uttered a sharp cry of pain. Her sobs died away as she retreated down the corridor.

After the old woman had gone, Father Benedict unlocked the door of the bedroom and stepped inside. By pressing her ear against the closet wall, Penny was able to hear every word of the ensuing conversation.

"Well, my dear," said Father Benedict to the imprisoned girl. "Are you ready to come to your senses?"

"If you mean, am I willing to sit quietly by and see you rob my grandmother, the answer is 'No!'"

"I do not care for your choice of words, my dear," replied the monk. "You are an impertinent child who must be disciplined."

"Wait until I get away from here!" the girl challenged. "People will learn exactly what's going on in this place!"

"Will they indeed? So you propose to make trouble?"

"I'll tell what I've seen. You're only a cheap trickster! Furthermore, you can't keep me a prisoner in this room."

"No?" Father Benedict's voice crackled with amusement. "In this house *I am the law!* Since you are in no mood to discuss matters reasonably, I shall leave you here. Your grandmother, I trust, will display a more sensible attitude."

"You leave my grandmother alone!" the imprisoned girl cried furiously. "You're only after her gems!"

"If you were to cooperate—"

"I'll never fall in with your schemes!" the girl exclaimed. "Let me out of here!"

Penny heard a scuffle and knew that an unsuccessful attempt had been made to reach the door. As her own hand groped along the closet wall, it suddenly encountered a small, circular panel of wood. As she pushed against it, a crack of light showed through.

"A peephole!" Penny thought. "Julia knew it was here! That was what she meant when she said I could see and listen!"

Stealthily, so as to make no sound, she slid the piece of wood aside.

Gazing into the semi-dark bedroom, she saw Father Benedict push the struggling girl backwards onto the canopied bed.

"You have settled your own fate!" he said angrily. "Now you'll stay here until I find a better place! Sweet dreams, my little wildcat!"

Quitting the room, he locked the heavy door. The girl on the bed buried her head in the dusty, scarlet draperies and began to cry.

Penny waited only until she was certain Father Benedict was far down the corridor. Then she rapped softly on the closet wall.

Through the peephole, she saw the girl start violently and look about the room.

"Hist!" Penny whispered. "Over here!"

She rapped again, and this time the girl saw the tiny hole in the wall. Leaping from bed, she came across the room.

"Who are you?" she demanded, unable to see Penny's face.

"A friend! I'm here to help you."

"Can you get me out of this room?"

"Father Benedict seems to have the only key," Penny told her. "I'll sneak out of here and telephone the police. But first, I must know exactly what case we have against Father Benedict."

"He's mean and cruel! He half starves the people who live here and takes all their money and jewels!"

"Why did he shut you up here?"

"Because I've opposed him. Though I tried hard to prevent it, he coaxed my grandmother to come to this horrible place."

"Have either of you been mistreated?" Penny asked.

"Until tonight, Father Benedict favored us above the other cult members. Of course, that was only because as yet he hasn't been able to get his thieving hands on the star sapphire!"

At mention of the gem, Penny's pulse leaped. No longer did she doubt that the girl was the missing Hawthorne heiress sought by Mr. Ayling.

"You're the one I picked up on the road," she said. "But you've never told me your name. Is it possible you're Rhoda—"

"Rhoda Hawthorne," the girl completed for her. "I refused to answer your questions before because I distrusted everyone."

"And now?"

"I realize you're a true friend—the only one I have. Oh, you must get me out of this room quickly! Please bring police at once!"

CHAPTER

19

A DORMITORY ROOM

"I'LL GET you out of this room somehow," Penny promised through the peephole. "First, before I go for police, tell me more. Why were you carrying a suitcase that night Louise and I met you on the road?"

"I was running away," Rhoda Hawthorne replied.

"Yet you returned here."

"I had to. When I thought about Grandmother alone in the clutches of Father Benedict, I knew I couldn't desert her. She is putty in his hands!"

"But why didn't you bring police here yourself, Rhoda?"

"What could I prove? Until tonight when Father Benedict locked me up, I had no real evidence against him."

"Even now, we haven't very much," said Penny. "He'll deny he imprisoned you unless police take him by surprise and find you here."

"Grandmother will be worrying about me," Rhoda

said anxiously. "She's in her room now, sick abed. I'm afraid it's from eating such vile food."

"What does the doctor think?"

"No doctor has seen her. Father Benedict won't allow anyone to call if he can prevent it. He has only one thought—to get his hands on the sapphire and leave here before police catch up with him."

"You're really convinced he is a crook?"

"I'm certain of it! Grandmother and I met him at a Florida resort. As soon as he learned about the star sapphire, he attached himself to us like a leech. Soon he found out Grandmother is superstitious about the gem, so he started playing upon her feelings. He told her about this wretched society of his and painted the monastery in such glowing colors that Grandmother became fascinated."

"So he talked her into coming here?"

"Yes," Rhoda said bitterly, "it was only supposed to be for a day's visit. But once we were inside the monastery, we became as prisoners. Letters are confiscated and there is no telephone."

"You did get away once."

"With Julia's help—yes. Only once though. The place is guarded by Winkey and he is very watchful."

"Tell me, have you seen Mr. Ayling, the insurance company investigator?"

"Mr. Ayling?" Rhoda was puzzled.

"I mean the man who was with me the day you

peeped at us from behind the curtain in Father Benedict's study," Penny explained.

"Oh! No, only on that day."

"Mr. Ayling came here to find you and your grandmother. Then he went to Chicago and hasn't returned. I'm afraid something has happened to him."

"I've seen no one here except members of the society," Rhoda said. "Sometimes though, I wonder what goes on in the cellar. Once I heard a dreadful commotion! And the way Julia screams when she is upset!"

"She's a simple soul."

"Simple perhaps, but she knows more than anyone else about the real secrets of this house."

"Speaking of secrets," said Penny hesitantly, "I'm wondering what ever became of the star sapphire?"

"It's safe—at least I think so," Rhoda replied. "Not even Grandmother knows where I have hidden it."

"Then there's no chance Father Benedict can get his hands on it while I go for police?"

"Not unless he forces me to tell where the gem is hidden. And I'll die first! But I'm afraid he may torture Grandmother in an attempt to make her reveal what she doesn't know."

Penny prepared to close the peephole. "I'll go for the authorities now as fast as I can," she promised. "Keep up your courage until I return."

"Do be careful," Rhoda warned nervously. "If

Father Benedict should catch you trying to escape, there's no guessing what he would do!"

Penny closed the peephole and stole out of the dark closet. The corridor was deserted.

Retracing her way to the cloister, the girl paused beside a wall niche a moment as she considered the safest way to attempt an escape.

"I'll try the kitchen window," she decided. "It worked well enough coming in."

On tiptoe she approached the kitchen, only to halt as she heard voices. Father Benedict was berating Old Julia again.

"There *were* eleven bowls of soup served!" she heard him insist. "Mrs. Hawthorne and her daughter were not in the dining room. So that makes one extra person unaccounted for. Julia, someone entered this house tonight to spy, and you know who the person is!"

"No! No! I dunno nothin'," the servant moaned. "Even if you strike me and break my bones I can't tell you no different!"

"We'll see about that," said the monk harshly. "After a few hours below, perhaps you'll be willing to talk!"

Julia uttered a squeal of terror. "Don't take me down into that awful place where the tombs are!" she pleaded. "Please!"

"Then tell me who entered this house tonight."

"I'll tell, if you quit twisting my arm," Julia sobbed. "Only I didn't want to get her into trouble. She didn't mean no harm."

"*She!*"

"It was just a girl."

"A blond?"

"I dunno. I guess so."

"It was that Parker girl!" Father Benedict muttered. "She represents the *Riverview Star*, worse luck!" Giving Julia a hard shake, he demanded: "She got in through the window?"

"I guess so. I dunno."

"You know nothing, especially when it suits your purpose!" Father Benedict accused her furiously. "Where is the girl now? Did she get away or is she still here?"

"I seen her a few minutes ago."

"Where?"

Penny's heart nearly failed her, for she was certain Old Julia would reveal that she had hidden in the closet with the peephole.

To her great relief, the woman replied that she had taken part in the cult ceremony and then had supped in the refectory.

"I knew that before, stupid!" Father Benedict shouted. The girl must still be in the building. I'll find her, and when I do—"

Waiting to hear no more, Penny retreated to the

cloister. All candles had been blown out and it was very dark.

"I must get out of here now or never!" she thought. "Father Benedict will start looking for me and he'll probably order Winkey to watch the gates."

Starting hurriedly along the cloister, she heard approaching footsteps. Momentarily confused, she started up a short, steep stairway to a balcony overlooking the court.

Belatedly, Penny realized she had turned toward the dormitories.

Opening from the balcony was a bedroom door which stood partly ajar.

After listening for a moment, and hearing no movement inside, she cautiously tiptoed into the room.

"A window here may be unlocked," she thought. "If the drop to the ground isn't too far, maybe I can get out this way."

As Penny crossed the room, an elderly woman she had failed to see, suddenly sat up in bed.

"Rhoda, is that you?" she asked in a whining voice. "Why have you been gone so long? Oh, I've been so worried!"

Penny hesitated, then went over to the bed.

"I'm not Rhoda, but a friend of hers," she explained. "Do you mind if I crawl out through the window?"

"It's nailed down and there are bars," the elderly

woman replied. "Oh, this is a horrible place! Rhoda tried to tell me. I wouldn't listen!"

Scarcely hearing, Penny ran to the window. As she pulled aside the dusty velvet draperies, she saw for herself that the window was guarded by ancient rusty bars. Everywhere escape seemed cut off!

Turning to the bed again, she observed with some alarm that the old lady had fallen back on her pillow. Moonlight flooding in through the diamond-shaped panes of glass accentuated her pallor.

"You're Mrs. Hawthorne, aren't you?" she inquired gently.

The woman nodded. She coughed several times and pulled the one thin coverlet closer about her.

"Where is Rhoda?" she asked. "Why doesn't she come to me?"

Penny could not tell her the truth—that her granddaughter had been locked in the chapel bedroom by Father Benedict. Nor could she express the fear that an even worse fate was in store for the girl unless help came quickly to the monastery.

As she groped for words, Mrs. Hawthorne suddenly gasped. Her face became convulsed and she writhed in bed.

"Oh, those stomach cramps!" she moaned. "They're starting again! Please—please, a doctor!"

Never had Penny felt so helpless as she watched the

poor woman suffer. Mrs. Hawthorne's wrinkled face broke out in perspiration. She gripped the girl's hand with a pressure that was painful.

When the cramp had passed, she lay limp and exhausted.

"I'll get a doctor here as soon as I can," Penny promised. "Until then, perhaps a hot water bottle will help."

"There's no hot water in the place," Mrs. Hawthorne mumbled. "Oh, if I ever get away from here alive—"

"Sh!" Penny suddenly interrupted. She placed her fingertips on the woman's lips.

Heavy footsteps warned her that someone approached.

"It may be Father Benedict!" Penny whispered. "Whatever you do, don't give me away! I must hide!"

Frantically, she looked about for a safe place. The room had no closet.

"Under the bed," urged Mrs. Hawthorne.

Penny wriggled beneath it. Barely had she secreted herself, than Father Benedict stamped into the bedroom.

CHAPTER

20

TRICKERY

LIGHTING HIS way with a tall, flickering candle, Father Benedict walked directly to the bed where Mrs. Hawthorne lay.

"How are you feeling?" he inquired with a show of sympathy.

"Dreadful," the woman murmured. "I must have a doctor."

"Do you really believe that a doctor can help you, my good woman?"

The question startled Mrs. Hawthorne. She half-raised herself from the pillow to stare at the monk.

"Why, what do you mean?" she asked. "Surely a doctor can give me medicine to help these wretched pains. It is only a stomach disorder."

"My dear Mrs. Hawthorne, surely you must realize that your difficulty is not one that a man of medicine can cure."

"You don't mean I have a serious, incurable disease?" the woman gasped.

"You are indeed suffering from a most serious malady which may take your life," affirmed Father Benedict. "Is it not true that bad fortune has pursued every owner of the star sapphire?"

Mrs. Hawthorne remained silent.

"Is it not so?" prodded the monk. "Think back over the history of the gem. Even your husband met with misfortune."

"And now you believe my turn has come? Oh!"

"I dislike to distress you," resumed Father Benedict with malice, "but perhaps by warning you I may yet save your life. Tonight in the crystal globe I saw your face. A message came that you must dispose of the star sapphire immediately or you too will die!"

"I—I always have hated and feared the gem," Mrs. Hawthorne whispered, her lips trembling. "You are right. It has brought only misfortune upon our family."

"Then your way is clear. You must dispose of the sapphire at once—tonight."

"The gem is very valuable. You suggest that I give it to your society?"

"To our society," corrected the monk. "Once you have contributed the gem, you will become our most honored member."

"The gem was left to me in trust for my granddaughter."

"You told me yourself you desire that it never should fall into her hands."

"Only because I fear evil will befall her. I had planned to sell the gem and place the money in her name."

Father Benedict beat an impatient tattoo with his foot. "The curse would remain," he insisted. "Only by giving the gem to a worthy charity can evil be erased. For your own sake and that of your granddaughter, I beg of you, give us the sapphire."

"A few days ago, I might have considered it," said Mrs. Hawthorne peevishly. "Now I don't even like this place. It is too much on the order of a prison. The food is wretched! Tomorrow if I am stronger, I shall take my granddaughter and leave."

"Indeed?" Father Benedict sneered. "For you there will be no tomorrow. I have seen the face of a corpse in my glass!"

Penny knew that the words shocked Mrs. Hawthorne, for she heard her draw in her breath sharply. But the woman retorted with spirit:

"You cannot frighten me with your predictions! Rhoda insisted from the first that you are an imposter! She is right! You'll get no gem from me!"

"No?" Father Benedict's voice became mocking. "We shall see!"

Placing the candle on the floor close to the bed, he

crossed the room to the old fashioned dresser. One by one, he began to paw through the drawers.

"Stop it!" cried Mrs. Hawthorne. "Don't dare touch my things!"

Father Benedict paid her not the slightest heed. Rapidly he emptied boxes and containers and tossed clothing in a heap on the floor.

With a supreme effort, Mrs. Hawthorne pulled herself from the bed. Staggering across the floor, she seized the man's arm.

Father Benedict pushed her backwards onto the bed.

"You are a cruel, heartless man!" Mrs. Hawthorne sobbed. The bed shook convulsively beneath her weight as she lay where Father Benedict had pushed her.

Penny was sorely tempted to go to the woman's assistance, but reason told her it would be sheer folly to betray her presence. Everything depended upon getting quickly and safely out of the monastery. If she failed, Father Benedict undoubtedly would escape, leaving them all locked in the building.

The monk now had finished searching the dresser and turned his attention to a suitcase. With professional skill and thoroughness, he ripped open the lining. Likewise, he explored every garment hem and pocket.

"To think that I ever trusted you!" Mrs. Hawthorne cried bitterly. "Oh, I see it all now! From the very first, you were after the sapphire!"

"And I have it too!" cried the man in triumph.

His sensitive, exploring fingers had come upon a small, hard object sewed into the hem of one of Mrs. Hawthorne's frocks.

"Don't you dare take the stone!" the woman screamed. "I'll have you arrested as a common thief!"

"You'll never get out of this room," chuckled the monk. "I intend to lock you in!"

The boast threw Penny into a panic. Not for an instant did she doubt that Father Benedict would carry out his threat. If he locked Mrs. Hawthorne in, she too would be a prisoner!

Penny had no time to plan strategy or reason out the best course. Already, Father Benedict had removed the gem from the hem of the garment.

Before he could examine it, or move toward the door, Penny, with a mighty "whoosh" blew out the candle.

Scrambling from beneath the bed, she darted to the door.

Taken by surprise, Father Benedict was too slow to intercept her. She slammed the door in his face, groping frantically for a key.

Finding none, she knew the monk must have the only one on his person.

"The fat's in the fire now for sure!" she thought in panic.

Penny raced across the balcony and down the stone

steps to the cloister. In this emergency the pillars, though shadowed, offered no protection whatsoever. Nor was the dry fountain bed a safe place in which to hide.

Pounding footsteps warned that there was no time in which to search for a hideout. The only possible place was under an old tarpaulin which lay in a heap on the tiles beside the fountain.

Wriggling beneath the canvas, Penny pulled the folds over her head.

Barely had she flattened herself on the floor than Father Benedict pounded into the cloister. So close did he pass to where she lay, that Penny could hear his heavy breathing.

"Now where did that brat go?" he muttered. "She's here somewhere!"

The monk rang a bell which brought Winkey on the run.

"I've looked everywhere for that Parker girl," he reported before the master could speak. "She must have got away."

"Fool!" rasped the monk. "She has been hiding in Mrs. Hawthorne's room! She saw me take the sapphire!"

"You mean you got the gem, boss?"

"Here in my hand. Hold your lantern closer and see for yourself."

A long pause followed. Penny guessed that the

two men were inspecting the gem beneath a light. She was unprepared for the next explosive comment of Father Benedict.

"I've been tricked!" he muttered. "This isn't the sapphire Mrs. Hawthorne showed me in Florida! It's only a cheap imitation!"

"Maybe that girl sneaked in and took it herself!"

"If she did it will be the worse for her! I know Mrs. Hawthorne brought a genuine sapphire into this house. Either her granddaughter has it, or this Parker pest!"

"What'll we do, boss?"

"We're leaving here as quickly as we can get away," Father Benedict said decisively. "We've over-played our hand and our luck has run out."

"You mean we're going without the sapphire?" grumbled Winkey. "After all our work?"

"We'll get the sapphire. First, we must make certain that Parker girl doesn't slip out of the building."

"I let the dogs loose in the yard. And the windows and doors are all locked. If she tries to get out, they'll set up a yip."

"Good! She must be somewhere in the house and we'll soon find her."

"How much did she learn, boss?"

"I don't know, but enough to jail us both! Go to my study and destroy all the papers you find there. Then bring the car to the rear exit."

"How soon we leaving?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"Can you get the sapphire in that time?" Winkey asked doubtfully. "What if the old lady holds out?"

"I've locked her in her room. Also the other women. I'll not bother with Mrs. Hawthorne. There are quicker methods."

"Her granddaughter?"

"Exactly. We'll carry out my original plan. Miss Rhoda will be glad to talk when I have finished with her!"

"It's kinda harsh treatment—"

"Do as you are told!" Father Benedict cut in sharply.

"Okay, boss," agreed Winkey. "I'll sure be glad to shake the dust of this place off my feet. This cult racket never was in our line. We got in deeper than we figured."

"Do less talking and more thinking!" snapped the monk. "I'll take care of Rhoda and have the sapphire within fifteen minutes. She's asleep by this time, I hope."

"I looked in through the peephole a minute ago," the hunchback informed. "Sleeping like a babe!"

"Good!" Father Benedict approved. His final order sent an icy chill down Penny's spine. "Give me your lantern, Winkey. I'll go below now and turn on the machinery."

CHAPTER

21

SNATCHED FROM THE FLAMES

FROM BENEATH the dusty tarpaulin, Penny had listened tensely as Father Benedict and Winkey planned their escape.

She knew that by morning they would be in another state, beyond reach of Riverview police.

Fifteen minutes! The time was so short—too short for her to summon authorities even if she could reach a telephone.

And what of Rhoda in the chapel bedroom? Father Benedict had spoken of turning on machinery in the cellar! What machinery did he mean?"

A great fear arose within Penny. Rhoda was in great danger! She must make every effort to save her —but how?

Father Benedict and his servant now were leaving the cloister, walking directly toward the canvas under which the girl huddled.

Suddenly, to Penny's horror, the dust of the tarpaulin began to irritate her nose.

She fought against an impulse to sneeze but could not control it. Though she pressed both hands against her nose, a muffled ker-chew came from beneath the canvas.

Father Benedict halted, looking sharply about the darkened cloister.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"I didn't hear nothin'," replied Winkey, flashing his lantern on the pillars.

"I thought someone sneezed."

"You're getting jumpy, boss," insisted the hunchback. "I sure didn't hear nothing."

"What's that over there by the fountain?" Father Benedict demanded, noticing the tarpaulin.

"Only an old piece of canvas. I brought it up from the basement this afternoon."

"For a second, I thought I saw it moving!"

"You've sure got the jumps," said Winkey. "If you want me to look for that girl again, I'll give the place a good going over."

"No, there's no time!" the monk decided. "As long as the dogs are loose in the yard, she never can get out of here without them sounding an alarm. Then we'll nab her."

"I'll go after the car and have it at the rear exit before you're ready to leave," the hunchback promised. "Just be sure you get the sapphire!"

"Leave it to me," said Father Benedict grimly. His

voice faded away and Penny knew that the two conspirators were at last leaving the cloister.

Waiting a moment longer to be certain they would not change their minds and return, she extricated herself from the folds of the grimy canvas.

"Wow! That was a close call!" she told herself. "If what Father Benedict said is true, then I'm trapped in this building along with the others! What a predicament!"

Penny groped for her flashlight and was reassured to find it still in her pocket. She tested it briefly, then switched it off again.

Tiptoeing down a long, damp-smelling corridor, she passed a window. Hopeful that it might be unlocked, she paused to test it.

Not only was the catch fastened, but the window also had been nailed. Peering out, she gazed hopefully toward the distant road. No cars were in sight. Nor was there a light gleaming in the windows of the Eckenrod cabin, over the hill.

Instead, Penny saw an ugly hound circling the monastery grounds, his nose to the earth.

"Winkey already has turned the dogs loose!" she thought in dismay. "I haven't a chance to get out of here quickly!"

Switching on her flashlight for an instant, Penny looked at her wristwatch. In astonishment, she saw that it was only twenty minutes after nine. She had

assumed the hour to be much later, so many events had transpired since her arrival at the monastery.

"If only I could let the *Star* office know of my predicament!" she thought. "Mr. DeWitt won't even wonder what's become of me before ten o'clock. By that time Father Benedict and Winkey will be miles from here!"

The main gate of the monastery had been closed and locked. Penny reasoned that even if she were able to get out of the building, the dogs would be upon her before she could scale the high boundary fence, and make her escape.

As she hesitated at the window, debating whether or not to smash the glass and take a chance, she heard the roar of an automobile motor.

For a moment she was hopeful a car was coming down the road. Then, with a sinking heart she realized that it was Winkey bringing the big black automobile from the front of the house to the rear exit.

"The minute he and Father Benedict get their thieving hands on the sapphire, they'll leave here!" she reasoned. "Oh, why can't I think of some way to stop them?"

Penny had left her own car parked on the road not far from the monastery. She was hopeful that should her father or anyone from the newspaper office seek her, they would see the car and deduct that she was somewhere inside the ancient building.

"But no one will come until it's too late," she thought. "Mrs. Weems probably went to bed early and didn't tell Dad I came here. Mr. DeWitt won't think about it until nearly deadline time at the *Star*."

Outside, the hounds kept roaming the grounds. Penny had never seen such vicious looking animals.

Abandoning all hope of getting away without risking being torn to pieces, she decided her wisest course would be to keep hidden until Father Benedict had driven away.

"Maybe by staying, I can help Rhoda," she reflected. "Father Benedict intends to force her to tell where the sapphire is hidden!"

With noiseless tread she started toward the chapel bedroom which adjoined the church ruins. In passing the monk's study she noticed that the door stood slightly ajar.

Peering cautiously in, she saw that the room was in disarray. All of Father Benedict's clothing, art treasures, and personal belongings had been removed. Drawers of the desk had been emptied of their contents.

In the fireplace, flames leaped merrily. Plainly, the monk had disposed of many papers by consigning them to the fire.

At the edge of the hearth lay several sheets torn from a notebook. One of the pages had caught fire and was burning slowly.

Recognizing it as a sheet listing society contributions, Penny darted forward and stamped out the flames.

Only half of the paper had been charred. Many of the names still could be read. Folding the good section, she placed it in her coat pocket.

Two other pages which had not caught fire proved to be blank.

Unable to rescue anything else from the flames, Penny quitted the study and moved hurriedly toward the chapel bedroom.

From the dormitories she now could hear muffled cries and poundings which told her cult members had discovered themselves locked in their rooms.

"I can't get them out without keys," Penny thought. "But if they make enough noise, someone may hear and come here to investigate."

The closing of a nearby door brought the girl up short. As she froze against the passageway wall, Father Benedict stepped from the closet adjoining the bedroom where Rhoda was imprisoned.

Instantly Penny guessed that he had been watching the girl through the peephole.

Father Benedict's satisfaction as he started toward the ruined church was frightening to behold. Thin lips were twisted into an ugly smile, and as he passed within a few feet of where Penny stood he muttered:

"Ah rest!—no rest but change of place and posture;
Ah sleep—no sleep but worn-out posture; Nature's swooning;
Ah bed!—no bed but cushion fill'd with stones."

CHAPTER

22

THE CANOPIED BED

IN THE chapel bedroom Rhoda Hawthorne had been greatly cheered to realize that soon she might be freed from imprisonment.

The brief conversation with Penny through the closet peephole encouraged her to believe that almost at once help would come.

Penny is proving to be one of the best friends I ever had and I hardly know her, she thought. *I wish now I had told her everything, especially about the sapphire.*

With regret the girl recalled how she had rebuffed Penny and Louise on the occasion when they had offered her a ride into Riverview.

But at that time she had considered them strangers who only meant to pry into her affairs. *If I had told everything then, Grandmother and I might have been spared much suffering,* she reflected. *I should have asked them to take me to the police. The worst mis-*

take of my life was coming back to this horrible place.

Restlessly, Rhoda tramped about the chapel room. The air was very stuffy and the absence of windows distressed her. She felt oppressed, as if the four walls were pressing in upon her.

The room was scantily furnished with only the huge canopied bed, an old fashioned dresser, and a table. There were no chairs.

Groping on the dresser, the girl found a stub of a candle in a holder. At first she could discover no matches. However, after examining all the dresser drawers, she came upon one.

Shielding it carefully from draughts, she managed to light it and ignite the wick of the candle.

"It won't burn longer than twenty minutes," she estimated. "But by that time, perhaps Penny will be back here with help."

The dim light depressed rather than cheered the girl. Cold currents of air coming from the chinks of the walls caused the flame to flicker weirdly, and almost go out.

A grotesque figure weaved like a huge shadow-boxer on the expanse of smoky plaster. At first, watching it in fascination, Rhoda could not determine its cause. Then, with no little relief, she decided it was a shadow of the bed draperies, moving slightly with the draughts of cold air.

The room had no heat. Soon, against her will,

Rhoda was driven by the chill to seek the warmth of the canopied bed.

With repugnance she eyed the strange, old-fashioned piece of furniture which dominated the room. The bed was wide enough to accommodate three or four persons comfortably. Tall posters of twisted wood supported a carved framework to which were attached dusty, scarlet draperies.

A moth-eaten carpet covered a section of floor directly beneath the bedstead. Rhoda gave it only a passing glance and did not think to look under its curling, frayed edges.

With a shiver of distaste, she pulled aside the draperies and crawled into the bed. No cover had been provided, but there were clean sheets. The damp-smelling spread offered a little relief from the cold.

For some time Rhoda lay staring at the beamed ceiling and trying in her mind to reconstruct the old chapel as it might have been in the days when the monastery was a religious center.

The girl had not the slightest intention of falling asleep. She felt wide awake, tense in every muscle. Not a sound escaped her, and every noise seemed intensified.

A board creaked.

It's nothing, she told herself. *All old houses make strange sounds, especially when a wind is blowing.*

Yet disturbing thoughts plagued the girl. What did

Father Benedict intend to do with her? Why had he locked her in this particular room?

Suddenly Rhoda stiffened and clutched the sheet convulsively. Was it imagination or had she heard a low moan?

The sound had seemed to come from beneath the bed. Half tempted to look beneath the draperies, she resisted the impulse.

I did hear something, she thought. *It sounded as if someone were in pain. And the noise came from the cellar below!*

Now to torment the girl came reflections of unexplained happenings since her arrival at the monastery. On several nights she had heard disturbances from the cellar region. Winkey, she knew, made frequent trips to the crypt upon one pretext or another.

Suddenly Rhoda was startled by a light and repeated tapping on the wall near the closet peephole.

Certain that it was Penny who had returned, she leaped out of bed and bounded across the room.

The panel of wood moved back and two eyes peered in at her.

"Is that you, Penny?" Rhoda whispered eagerly.

"Julia!" was the answer.

"Oh," Rhoda murmured in bitter disappointment. "I hoped—"

"Master send you some supper," the servant mumbled. "Bread and coffee."

"I don't want them!"

"Better you eat and drink," Julia admonished. "But do not sleep. This room is evil—evil!"

"You're telling me!" retorted Rhoda, lapsing into slang. "All I want is to get out of here. Julia, let me free and I'll pay you well! I'll give you anything you want!"

"No key."

"But you know where it is kept?"

"The master keep keys on him always."

"He would! Can't you trick him or something?" Seeing the old woman's blank stare, Rhoda sighed and answered her own question. "No, it's too much to expect. But maybe you could slip away from here and bring help—"

"Master never let me out of the house. My place is in the kitchen. I must go there now—to the kitchen."

"Wait!" Rhoda checked her. "You say Father Benedict sent some food? On second thought, I'll take it. He may not give me anything again for a long while. I expect to be out of here soon, but something could go wrong."

Rhoda longed to ask Old Julia if she had seen Penny or if the girl had escaped. However, knowing that the old woman might divulge the secret to Father Benedict, she wisely did not bring up the subject.

Julia thrust a hard crust of bread in through the

peephole, and then shoved a cup of steaming black coffee into her hand.

"Thanks, Julia," Rhoda said. "I know you mean well. Working in a place like this isn't your fault. How did you ever meet Father Benedict anyhow?"

The question was an unfortunate one. Apparently, unpleasant recollections stirred in the woman's brain, for her eyes became wild. She muttered gibberish Rhoda could not understand. Then she slammed shut the peephole.

A moment later, Rhoda heard her footsteps as she left the closet and retreated down the corridor.

"Poor old Julia," she sighed. "Wonder if I'll ever come to the same pass she's in? I'm sure I will if I have to spend a night in this torture chamber!"

Shivering, Rhoda climbed back into bed. She bit into the bread. Discovering it to be moldy, she hurled it into a far corner of the room.

Rhoda was cold and the hot coffee smelled good. She sipped it cautiously. The brew tasted peculiar, sweetish and unlike any coffee she ever had had before. Nevertheless, it was hot and would warm her chilled bones perhaps.

She drank the entire cupful and leaned back on the pillow.

What was it Julia said, she mused drowsily. *Oh, yes, I must stay awake. Must stay awake.*

But the warmth of the bed was closing in on her, inviting her to shut her eyes. Though she fought against it, she could feel sleep taking possession of her.

She tried to raise her hand and found it too heavy to lift. Only then did the frightening truth seep into her mind. She had been drugged! Undoubtedly, Father Benedict had slipped a heavy sleeping powder into the coffee! And she stupidly had drunk all of the brew.

The sound of the peep-hole panel moving again, aroused her momentarily from the stupor into which she rapidly was falling.

Rhoda saw a face at the opening and recognized Father Benedict. He spoke no word, but gazed at her with an expression of evil gloating.

The girl tried to move but her limbs seemed paralyzed. She could not stir.

Then the panel closed and Father Benedict had gone.

Rhoda fell into a sleep only to be rudely awakened as the huge bed gave a slight jerk. The stupefied girl could not think where she was for a moment.

Her head was a-whirl and the room seemed to be spinning. Like a person taking ether, she felt as if she were slipping farther and farther away from reality with each breath.

The canopied bed had come to life and was moving slowly downward through an opening in the floor.

Rhoda stiffled an impulse to laugh. Perspiration broke out in every pore as she suddenly knew that it was not a dream nor a horrible imagining. *The bed actually was moving!*

As she realized her desperate plight, the girl struggled to free herself from the bed clothing. But her limbs refused to obey the commands of her mind. Paralyzed with fright, she tried to scream and made only a choking sound in her throat.

CHAPTER

23

DESCENT INTO THE CRYPT

MEANWHILE, A great fear had taken possession of Penny as she saw Father Benedict leave the chapel bedroom closet and disappear down a corridor leading into the ruins of the church.

The expression of his face and his evil mutterings warned her that the man thoroughly enjoyed his role, despite his insistence that he abhorred violence.

Fearing for Rhoda's safety, Penny waited only until he had vanished. Then she slipped into the closet of the bedroom and fumbled for the peephole opening.

She found it and peered anxiously into the darkened bed chamber. Rhoda was lying on the canopied bed, apparently sound asleep.

"Rhoda!" Penny called in a loud whisper.

The girl did not stir.

As Penny whispered the name still louder, she saw the bed jerk. The floor beneath it began to move slowly downward.

In horror, Penny recalled what Jake Cotton, the carpenter, had told her about repairing the ancient lift. Rhoda was being lowered into the crypt below!

"Rhoda!" she cried. "Wake up! Quick! Jump out of bed!"

The girl seemed to hear for she moved slightly and made a choking sound in her throat. But she could not extricate herself from the slowly descending bed.

Numb with despair, Penny saw the girl disappear beyond view. There was a whine of machinery as the bed apparently came to a standstill on the subterranean floor below.

Then after a moment, she heard movement again. The bed slowly ascended. A glance sufficed to show Penny that it was empty.

"I've got to help her!" she thought. "That fiend will torture her into telling where the sapphire is hidden if I don't think of some scheme for saving her. But how?"

Quitting the closet, Penny sought the same passageway Father Benedict had taken into the ruined church.

As she cautiously opened the squeaky door, she saw before her shattered Gothic columns which once had supported a magnificent roof. Now dim stars cast a ghostly light over a mass of piled-up rubble.

Walls, however, had proved remarkably sturdy, rising to a height Penny could not hope to scale. There were no visible exits.

"Where did Father Benedict go?" she speculated. "Steps must lead down to the crypt."

Penny flashed her light about, seeking an opening. Investigating a pile of stone which had tumbled from an archway, she was elated to find her search at an end. Behind the piled up rocks, cleverly concealed, was a vaulted stone passage and stairway leading down.

Though Penny knew it was highly dangerous to venture below, she did not hesitate. A step at a time, and pausing frequently to listen, she stole down toward the inky blackness of the crypt.

The stone walls on either side of the narrow, curving stairway were cold and clammy to the touch. Water dripped from overhead.

Ahead, in a sunken recess amid the stones, the girl suddenly saw a shadowy figure. Startled, she jerked to a standstill. Then, observing that the object was not a human being but a rusty coat of armor, she breathed easier and went on.

A minute later, as she crept around a turn of the stairway, terror gripped her at first glimpse of the dimly lighted burial crypt.

In grim, orderly rows were the elaborately carved stone sarcophaguses of former residents of the monastery.

Beyond the tombs, backed against a wall, sat Rhoda. Sleepy-eyed, her hair in disarray, she faced Father

Benedict who held a lighted lantern close to her face.

Jay Highland had doffed his long robes and stood revealed in ordinary gray business suit. In his coat pocket, within easy reach of his right hand, was a revolver.

"Wake up!" he said, giving Rhoda a hard shake. "You're only pretending now! The drug in the coffee was not strong enough to keep you asleep. Wake up!"

Rhoda stared at him and her eyes widened in horror.

"You fiend!" she accused him. "Don't you dare touch me! I'll scream!"

"Scream at the top of your lungs, my dear. Only the dead will hear you."

"The dead! Oh!" A shudder wracked Rhoda's thin body as she became aware of the tombs in the crypt. "Why did you bring me here?"

"For one purpose. I want the sapphire. Hand it over and you will not be harmed."

"I haven't the gem."

"But you know where it is."

Rhoda remained silent.

"You'll tell," Highland rasped, losing all patience. "I haven't all day! You tricked me with that cheap substitute, and you induced your grandmother to hold out against me. Now we are through playing."

"You're nothing but a cheap crook!"

"A crook perhaps," said the man, "but hardly cheap.

The sapphire should be worth $50,000 at a conservative estimate. Now where is it?"

"You'll never learn from me!" Rhoda cried defiantly. "I'll die before I'll tell!"

"My! My! Such heroics! However, I think you will change your mind. Let me show you something, my dear."

Setting the lantern on the floor, Highland grasped Rhoda roughly by the arm and led her to a small doorway at the far side of the crypt.

"Tell me what you see," he purred.

Rhoda drew in her breath sharply and recoiled from the sight. She was speechless with fright.

"My dear, I was not thinking of mistreating you—certainly not," Highland purred. "No, instead we will bring your aged grandmother down here."

"You wouldn't dare!" Rhoda gasped. "Why, she's sick."

"The damp and cold will be bad for her, no doubt," agreed the imposter. "When I saw her tonight, she seemed to have developed a severe cough. The onset of pneumonia perhaps."

"Oh!"

"You could so easily spare her suffering," continued the man wickedly. "Merely by telling me where you hid the sapphire. I know your grandmother had it when she came into this house. But you made off with it, substituting a paste gem."

"It's true, I did hide the gem," Rhoda confessed. "Punish me—not Grandmother."

"Unless you tell me where the sapphire is hidden she shall be brought down here and treated as those others who defied me." The man jerked his head toward the room beyond Penny's view. "What do you say?"

"Let me think about it for a few minutes."

"You're stalling for time, hoping that Parker girl will bring help!" the man accused. From his pocket he took a stout cord with which he securely bound Rhoda's hands and feet.

Bracing her back against the wall, he likewise whipped a handkerchief gag from his clothing.

"This is your last chance," he warned. "Will you tell, or shall I go for your grandmother?"

"I'll tell," Rhoda whispered. "The gem is a long ways from here."

"Where?"

"Down by the river docks."

"By the river docks! A likely story!"

"You remember I ran away?" Rhoda asked hurriedly. "I took my suitcase, intending not to come back. Then for Grandmother's sake I returned. I was afraid I might never get a chance to sneak my clothes out again, so I hid the suitcase under a dock by the river."

"And the gem?"

"I took it with me when I ran away. It was sewed

in the hem of a blue skirt packed in the suitcase."

"Fool!" Highland exclaimed furiously. "Of all the stupid tricks! Where is the suitcase now?"

"Still under the dock unless someone has found it. But it should be there, because I pushed it up high out of sight beneath the underpinning."

"Which dock?" the man rasped.

"It was just at the edge of Riverview. Dock Fourteen."

"At least you remember the number!" he snapped. "If I fail to find the gem, I'll come back here and make you pay! You may be certain of that!"

"I hope you do come back and that the police are waiting at the gate!" Rhoda retorted. "I hope they put you in prison for the rest of your life!"

Picking up the lantern, Jay Highland started toward the stairway where Penny crouched. She moved hurriedly behind the door which opened into the crypt.

Slight as was the sound she made, Highland detected it.

"Who is there?" he called, holding his lantern high. "Answer or I'll shoot!"

Penny did not doubt that the man would carry out his threat. Her hand closed on a stone which lay on a ledge directly behind her.

"Don't shoot," she said, exposing herself to view.

"So it's you again!" hissed Highland. "I might have known!"

Penny let fly the stone. It struck the lantern. The light went out and oil and flame splattered over the stone floor.

Knowing it was her only chance to escape, Penny made a wild dash up the stairs. But she could not climb swiftly enough.

Jay Highland pounded hard after her. As she neared the top of the circular steps, he seized her arm and pulled her backwards.

Penny fought like a tiger to free herself. Together they stumbled and rolled down the wide stones to the floor of the crypt. There the man pressed his revolver hard into the girl's ribs, and she knew the game was up.

"Get in there!" he said, giving her a hard push. "This time you'll stay!"

As Penny reeled backwards into a wall, she heard the door of the crypt close and lock. With despair she realized that she too was a prisoner in the chamber of the dead.

CHAPTER

24

CHAMBER OF THE DEAD

FURIOUS AT herself because she had been so careless, Penny quickly tested the door. Finding it securely fastened as she had known it would be, she reached for her flashlight. It was missing from her pocket.

Though she groped about in the darkness, she could not find it. Giving up, she next turned her attention to Rhoda Hawthorne.

Thongs about the girl's wrists and ankles had been loosely tied. In a minute, Penny had set her free.

"Now to find a way out of here!" she exclaimed. "Highland and Winkey probably are driving to the river dock by this time!"

"It's no use trying to get out," Rhoda said despairingly as she rubbed her bruised wrists. "I'm sure this door is the only exit. Look in the adjoining room and you'll see what I mean."

Even as Penny started for the inner doorway, she

heard a low moan of pain from someone imprisoned there.

"Who is it?" she asked tensely.

"I don't know," Rhoda admitted, huddling close beside Penny. "Two men, one of them in frightful condition."

"Can't we set them free? Rhoda, try to find my flashlight. It fell somewhere near the stairway."

While Rhoda groped for the flashlight, Penny entered the inner prison room. Not until she was very close could she see two men who were chained to a supporting pillar. Gags covered the mouths of both victims.

Penny untied the cloths. The first man she thus freed was someone she never before had seen. But as she jerked the gag from the lips of the second prisoner, she was startled to recognize Mr. Ayling.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"In the flesh, or what's left of it," the investigator attempted to banter. "Nice fix for an investigator, eh? The company probably will give me a merit award for this!"

"How were you enticed here?"

"It's a long story," sighed Mr. Ayling. "I've not been chained here long, fortunately. My companion, Joseph Merkill, is in much worse shape. He's been here a couple of days."

"I'll set him free first," Penny offered. She groped

along the chains which fastened the man to the stone column. "Handcuffs? How can I get them off?"

"You can't, without a key," replied Mr. Ayling. "You'll have to go for help, or if there's no escape, wait until someone finds us here."

"That may not be before morning! Even if police should come here tonight, they might not see the stairway to the crypt."

"Any chance to break down the door?"

"I doubt it. Rhoda and I can try though."

"Rhoda Hawthorne! So it was her voice I heard! She and her grandmother are imprisoned also?"

"Yes, Rhoda's with me. Her grandmother, seriously ill, is locked in a bedroom upstairs. Who is Mr. Merkill?"

"His wife is an inmate here," the investigator explained. "Jay Highland—I know now he's a notorious jewel thief—induced Mrs. Merkill to come to the monastery. After he fleeced her of a diamond necklace, she smuggled a note out, telling how she was being mistreated. Her husband, from whom she had been estranged, decided to investigate. He came here alone. Discovering what was going on, he threatened to expose Highland to the police."

"Highland tricked me," Mr. Merkill added. "He promised I could take my former wife away and he would close the monastery. To show there were no hard feelings, he suggested we have coffee together.

I drank it and became so sleepy I had to go to bed. That's all I remember until I woke up here, chained to a post!"

"I should have been more suspicious of Highland the first time I met him," Mr. Ayling blamed himself.

"Why did you go to Chicago?" Penny asked as she worked at the chains.

"I know now it was Highland who sent me the fake telegram. He wanted to get me away from here. While in Chicago, I contacted my home office and obtained information which convinced me Highland was a gem thief. So I came here, intending to demand a police investigation."

"I met one train," said Penny. "You weren't on it."

"I didn't arrive until early tonight. When the train came in, Winkey and Mr. Highland were waiting at the station."

"For you, obviously?"

"Yes, they told me Mrs. Hawthorne was at the monastery, seriously sick and wanted to see me at once. The story fitted with my own conclusion that despite Highland's previous statements, Mrs. Hawthorne was here. So I foolishly agreed to accompany them."

"Then what happened?"

"In the car, speeding out here, I realized I was being foolhardy to return to the monastery without police escort. At an intersection I tried to get out. Winkey

slugged me. That's the last I knew until I found myself in this crypt."

Rhoda now groped her way to the door of the inner prison room.

"I found the flashlight but it's broken," she reported.

"With or without a light, we must get out of here and bring the police!" Penny exclaimed. "We haven't a chance to free Mr. Ayling and Mr. Merkill ourselves."

"And you haven't a chance to get out of here either —not until someone breaks into the house," Mr. Ayling added. "The only door is the one Highland locked."

"There is another exit!" Penny recalled. "Mr. Eckenrod showed it to me on the map of this old building. If only we can find it!"

Filled with hope, she began to grope about the walls of the inner room. In the semi-darkness, she could find no break anywhere on the rough stone surface.

"According to the map, the opening should be along this wall," she told Rhoda who joined her in the search. "But there's nothing here."

"Maybe the opening was sealed up years ago."

Though half convinced Rhoda was right, Penny would not give up. Even after her friend had abandoned the search, she kept tapping the walls.

One section, adjoining a large stone tomb, gave off

a hollow sound. But try as she would, Penny could not find a moveable section of wall.

"It's no use," she admitted, "unless—"

"Unless what?" Rhoda demanded as Penny's voice trailed off.

"What a dud I am! I remember now, Mr. Eckenrod said the hidden passage comes out through a tomb in the churchyard! So the entrance to the tunnel may be through this tomb which stands against the wall!"

"The wall did give off a hollow sound when you tapped it," Rhoda declared, hope reviving.

"See if you can open the door of the tomb!" Mr. Ayling urged, becoming excited. "I have a hunch you're on the right track!"

Thus urged, Penny overcame her own reluctance. The latch on the big stone door appeared to be locked. She experimented with it for awhile, and was rewarded to hear a sharp click. As she pulled on the door with all her strength, it slowly swung backwards.

Peering in, she saw that the tomb was empty. Also, the back wall was missing.

"The entrance to the passageway!" she cried. "We've found it!"

As Rhoda sprang to her feet, Penny hesitated. She felt it would be cruel to abandon the two men who remained chained to the column.

"Go as fast as you can!" Mr. Ayling urged. "It's

our only hope! If you get out safely, send the police after Highland and Winkey! Then bring help."

"We'll hurry!" Penny promised.

She grasped Rhoda's trembling hand and started through the opening into a narrow, low passageway vaulted over with brick.

"You say we'll come out in the churchyard?" Rhoda gasped, huddling close behind her friend.

"I imagine so. This passage can't be very long. I only hope it isn't blocked by a cave-in."

Their anxiety increased as they inched their way along. Frequently they were forced to climb over piles of brick which had fallen from the ceiling.

Once they were certain the passage was completely blocked. However, Penny pulled aside a mass of debris, enabling them to climb through and go on.

Then at last the tunnel began to ascend over wet, slippery ground.

"We're coming out!" Penny announced jubilantly. "I can see a crack of light ahead!"

A few feet farther and the passageway was blocked by a small stone door. However, dim light shone beneath it and the girls could feel cold night air on their cheeks.

Penny tugged at the door and it opened readily. The pair emerged into another empty tomb. Closing the stone door carefully behind them, they made their way out into the night.

"We're still on the grounds!" Penny observed in a hushed voice as she looked alertly about. "In the old graveyard."

"Any sign of Father Benedict or the dogs?" Rhoda whispered nervously.

"Nary a trace. The car at the rear of the monastery is gone! We must get to a telephone as quickly as we can!"

Alternately stumbling over fragments of stone and mounds of earth, the girls raced for the front gate. Even as they reached it, a car skidded to a standstill close beside the fence.

"It's someone from the *Star* office!" Penny cried, recognizing one of the newspaper-owned automobiles.

As she struggled with the latch of the big gate, her father, Jerry Livingston, and Salt Sommers leaped from the car.

"That you, Penny?" called Mr. Parker anxiously. "We were getting mighty worried about you. What kept you here so long?"

"This and that," replied Penny, opening the gate. "It will take too long to tell. We need help and need it fast!"

As rapidly as she could, she related the essential facts of Jay Highland's flight, apparently to the river docks.

"Salt, streak for the nearest phone and turn in a police alarm!" Mr. Parker ordered.

"It may be too late to overtake Highland," Penny

said anxiously. "But if we don't catch him, the Hawthorne sapphire will be lost!"

"Don't bother about the suitcase under the dock," Rhoda interposed. "Just get Mr. Ayling, my grandmother and all those poor folks out of the monastery. That's the important thing."

"Salt can come back here and wait until police open up the monastery," Mr. Parker said, thinking fast. "Jerry and I will try to pick up Highland's trail!"

"I'll send another squad to the river," Salt promised, starting off at a run toward Vernon Eckenrod's cabin across the fields.

"Highland and Winkey are heading for Dock Fourteen," Penny said. "Dad, I'll go with you to point it out."

"The suitcase really doesn't matter," Rhoda interrupted again. "You see, the sapphire—"

Jerry, Mr. Parker and Penny were not listening. Already they were running to the press car. The publisher started the engine with a roar, and the automobile raced off to make a quick turn and speed toward the city.

Disregarding the icy road, Mr. Parker drove at high speed. Once the car skidded dangerously and barely missed a ditch.

Soon they approached the outskirts of the city. Penny watched the riverfront intently. She was the first to glimpse the familiar long, black automobile

parked close to the dock where Rhoda had hidden her suitcase.

"There's Highland's car!" she cried. "He and Winkey must be here! Probably they're under the dock now! Highland is armed, Dad."

"Then our best bet is to try to keep the men in sight until police catch up with us," Mr. Parker said, pulling up beside the other car. "We're unarmed and can put up no fight."

"If those birds are under the dock on the ice, they're taking their lives in hand," observed Jerry quietly. "All day, the river's been on the verge of breaking up. When she goes, it will be with a bang!"

Penny opened the car door and leaped out. "I can't see anyone down there," she said anxiously. "Do you suppose they abandoned the car after getting the suitcase?"

Fearful that they had arrived too late, the trio ran down a boardwalk to the docks.

Suddenly, Mr. Parker caught Penny by the arm, restraining her.

"There they are!" he whispered. "See! Just coming out from under the dock!"

Two men, easily recognized as Jay Highland and Winkey, climbed from beneath the long dock. The hunchback was burdened with a suitcase.

"What will we do?" Penny whispered. "We can't let them escape with the sapphire!"

"Listen!" commanded Jerry. "I have a hunch we won't need to do anything except wait!"

Even as he spoke, a loud crack not unlike the report of a gun, sounded along the riverfront. The ice was breaking up!

Jay Highland and his companion, well aware of their danger, began to run. Frantically, they sought a place at which to climb up over the high docks. But too late. Already the river ice was clearing away. A great crack appeared directly in front of the two men.

In panic, they started the other way, only to see water on all sides. Then the block on which they stood, began to drift slowly off.

"Help!" shouted Winkey hoarsely. "Help!"

In panic, the hunchback turned his eyes shoreward. Seeing Penny, her father and Jerry on the planking above, he realized that only arrest faced him if he were rescued. Fear gave way to blind rage.

"You'll never get the sapphire!" he shouted. "I'll see it in the bottom of the river first!"

Raising the case high over his head, he hurled it into the churning water. The next instant the ice beneath his feet gave way, and both he and his master plunged into the river!

CHAPTER

25

THE STAR SAPPHIRE

IN A MOMENT, the two men reappeared above the surface of the water, struggling frantically for grips on the floating cakes of ice.

Coiled around a dock post lay an old rope which had not been taken in for the winter. Jerry and Mr. Parker quickly obtained it and tossed it squarely between the two men.

Both grasped it and were pulled slowly toward shore.

Just then a police car drove up at high speed, parking close by.

"Salt's telephone call went through!" Penny cried, signaling to the officers who piled out of the car. "The police arrived just when we need them!"

The shivering pair had no opportunity to attempt escape. As they were pulled out of the water, officers placed them under arrest.

"All right! You've got us!" snarled Winkey. "But

you'll never find the suitcase! It's at the bottom of the river!"

"Quiet!" Jay Highland warned him. "Anything you say will be used against us!"

Gazing gloomily at the churning water where the suitcase had been lost, Penny asked if the river might not be dragged after the ice had gone out.

"We'll mark the place," an officer promised. "Don't count on the case being found though. The current is fast here. Objects could be carried a long distance."

Sullen and silent, the two prisoners were removed to the police car. After consulting with Mr. Parker, officers agreed to take Highland and Winkey to the monastery enroute to the lockup. By confronting them with their victims, it was hoped Winkey at least, might make damaging statements.

Penny, Jerry, and Mr. Parker followed close behind as the police car sped to the monastery. Other policemen had arrived there, summoned by Salt. The front door had been broken in, and a search was being made of the building.

Spying Salt at the gate, Penny ran to ask if Mr. Ayling, Mr. Merkill, and Rhoda's grandmother had been released.

"Rhoda's inside now, showing the officers the different rooms," the photographer explained. "Why don't you go on in?"

"Guess I will," Penny agreed, starting up the driveway. "I certainly hate to tell her the bad news though. The sapphire has been lost in the river! It was in her suitcase."

Jerry and Mr. Parker overtook the girl as she entered the monastery. Hearing voices in Mr. Highland's study, they all went there.

A fire had been rebuilt in the grate, and cult members, released from their rooms, were being herded into the chamber. Mrs. Hawthorne, looking very ill, lay on a couch, covered by coats. Beside her, Rhoda hovered anxiously.

Seeing Penny, the girl crossed the room to whisper: "Grandmother is very sick, but Captain Duveen of the police force says she will pull through all right. We've sent for an ambulance to take her to the hospital."

"Have Mr. Ayling and Mr. Merkill been freed yet?"

"Police are down in the crypt now. Did you catch Winkey and that cruel Jay Highland?"

"We did," Penny replied, "but the story is too long to tell now. I'm afraid though, I have bad news."

"How do you mean?"

"The sapphire is gone. Winkey hurled your suitcase into the river."

Rhoda's tense face relaxed into a little smile. "Has that been worrying you?" she asked.

"Naturally."

"But I tried to tell you—you were in such a hurry you wouldn't listen!"

"You tried to tell me what?"

"Why, the sapphire wasn't in the suitcase. It's here in the house."

"But I thought you said you took it with you when you ran away!"

"I did. Then when I decided to leave my suitcase under the dock for a quick getaway should I try to escape from this place later on, I brought the sapphire back with me. I was afraid to leave it, even sewed up in a dress hem, for fear someone would find the suitcase."

"Yet you substituted a fake gem for the real one."

"I did," Rhoda agreed, "because I was certain Highland sooner or later would attempt to steal the gem."

"Then what became of the real sapphire? Is it safe?"

"I hope so," Rhoda said earnestly. "Let's see if we can find it."

Taking Penny by the hand, she led her down the hall to the cloister. At a niche in the wall, she abruptly paused.

"It should be here, beneath this broken statuette," she declared. "I found a tiny crack in the stone, just large enough to insert the gem. Lend me a hairpin, please."

Penny gave her a bobbypin. Rhoda pried beneath the statuette and presently found the small object for which she searched.

"It's here!" she announced triumphantly. "See!"

Into Penny's hand she dropped a star-shaped gem which under artificial light had taken on a violet hue.

"By daylight it's even more beautiful," Rhoda explained. "It looks sky blue then."

"Never have I seen anything so gorgeous," Penny murmured in awe. "And to think Jay Highland nearly made off with it! How clever of you to let him believe it was hidden in the suitcase!"

"I was desperate," Rhoda chuckled. "Grandfather willed the sapphire to me, and I intend to keep it always."

"Then you're not afraid of the old superstition, that harm will befall the owner?"

"I should say not!" grinned Rhoda. "That was only Grandmother's idea. If ordinary precautions are taken, the gem always will be safe. After all, it's highly insured."

"As Mr. Ayling now realizes to his sorrow," added Penny. "Let's see if he and Mr. Merkill are out of the crypt."

Before the girls could find the stairway leading down, policemen appeared, assisting the two men to the first floor of the monastery. Mr. Ayling, who had

been imprisoned only a short time, was able to walk. However, it was necessary for officers to carry Mr. Merkill.

"Save my wife," he pleaded. "She is here somewhere. That crook stole a diamond necklace from her too!"

"Your wife is safe and in good health," the officer assured him. "We've found no jewelry though. Describe the necklace."

While he was being carried outside on an improvised stretcher, Mr. Merkill gave police a detailed description of the missing jewelry.

Other persons, members of the cult, also gathered around to press claims for articles Mr. Highland had taken from them.

Under guard, the former master of the monastery and Winkey, were removed from the patrol car to be confronted with victims they had fleeced. Jay Highland arrogantly denied he had accepted or stolen any object of value.

"You have no evidence against me," he defied the group. "True, I established a cult here, but entirely within the law. Not even the sapphire was found in my possession! These people lie if they say I took jewelry from them. They were not charged a penny, even for room and lodging."

"You say you took nothing from them?" Penny inquired. "Look at this!"

From her pocket, she removed the charred sheet of paper rescued from the fireplace. Taking care that Highland should not get his hands on it, she gave it to one of the policemen.

"This is good evidence!" the officer declared. "These birds will talk all right after we get them to the station!"

Highland and Winkey were escorted back to the police car.

Before they could enter it, Mr. Eckenrod hobbled down the street. He walked with a cane and under his arm carried a large painting which he was bringing home from the nearby art museum where it had been on display.

"Well, what goes on here?" he demanded, pausing to stare at the prisoners. "Winkey and the great master under arrest!"

Told of the events that had led to the apprehension of the two crooks, he grinned with undisguised delight. "Excellent! Excellent!" he chortled. "I always knew these two were criminals! Once they are convicted in court, I may be able to buy this property and convert it into a real show place."

"At least you'll be allowed to complete your paintings without sneaking into the monastery through the secret passageway!" laughed Penny. "Showing me that building map certainly paid dividends!"

"I hope they give Winkey twenty years," said the

artist. Purposely he spoke so that the hunchback could hear. "The little weasel deserves it!"

"Oh, I do, eh?" snarled Winkey. Breaking away from two policemen who were shoving him into the police car, he hurled himself upon the startled artist.

Before the vicious little man could be pulled off, he had pummeled Mr. Eckenrod severely.

"Are you hurt?" Penny asked anxiously as the artist was helped to his feet.

"No!" he snapped. "Hold this cane and let me at that treacherous jailbird!"

Officers restrained the excited man as he would have attacked Winkey. Handcuffs were snapped on the hunchback's wrists. Just then, Penny uttered a startled cry.

"Look at Winkey's hump!" she exclaimed. "It's all out of shape!"

Indeed, the fellow presented a ludicrous appearance as he stood there, his large hump far over on one shoulder.

"It's a fake!" the girl cried. "He's not a real hunchback!"

One of the policemen reached out, and with a quick jerk, ripped the artificial hump from beneath the man's shirt.

"Interesting," he commented. "This hump has made a safe carryall for the loot!"

As Penny, her friends, and cult members gathered close, the pouch was opened. Inside were found the diamond necklace stolen from Mrs. Merkill, several valuable brooches, a black cameo, pearl earrings, an emerald-cut diamond, and other items.

Eagerly, cult members identified their stolen property.

"This sews up our case," declared one of the officers in satisfaction. "We'll not need a confession now to send these two up for a long stretch!"

The prisoners were hustled into the police car, which set off at top speed for the Riverview Safety Building. Ambulances began to arrive to remove cult members deemed in need of medical attention.

"What about Old Julia?" Penny inquired. "Where is she to be sent?"

"She must be committed to a mental institution for treatment," Mr. Ayling said regretfully. "Perhaps with proper care, she will fully recover."

"Who is she, I wonder?"

"One of Highland's victims in an earlier deal, I judge," replied the investigator. "Obviously her mind became unhinged from the cruelty she witnessed and experienced. Apparently, she has no friends or relatives."

"I'll never forget how she screamed at night," said Rhoda with a shiver.

"Nor will I," added Penny. "If it hadn't been for

her cry which first drew me to the monastery—well, Highland would still be here, ruling supreme."

Presently, along with other members of the strange household, Old Julia was taken away. One of the last to be removed was Mrs. Hawthorne, who would be sent to Riverview Hospital for a complete checkup.

Rhoda, preparing to accompany her grandmother, hurriedly said goodbye to Penny. "I'll see you tomorrow and really thank you for all you did tonight," she promised earnestly. "I hope we can be friends always."

Mr. Ayling then tried to express his appreciation to the Parkers.

"As an investigator, you're the tops," he praised Penny. "If it hadn't been for you, Jay Highland certainly would have made off with the sapphire, and our company would have had to pay plenty. If ever I can repay the favor, let me know."

Her reply was cut short by Mr. Parker who glanced nervously at his watch.

"I don't like to break up this little party, but we must hot-foot it to the *Star* office!" he exclaimed. "Penny, we have barely thirty minutes in which to catch the three-star edition!"

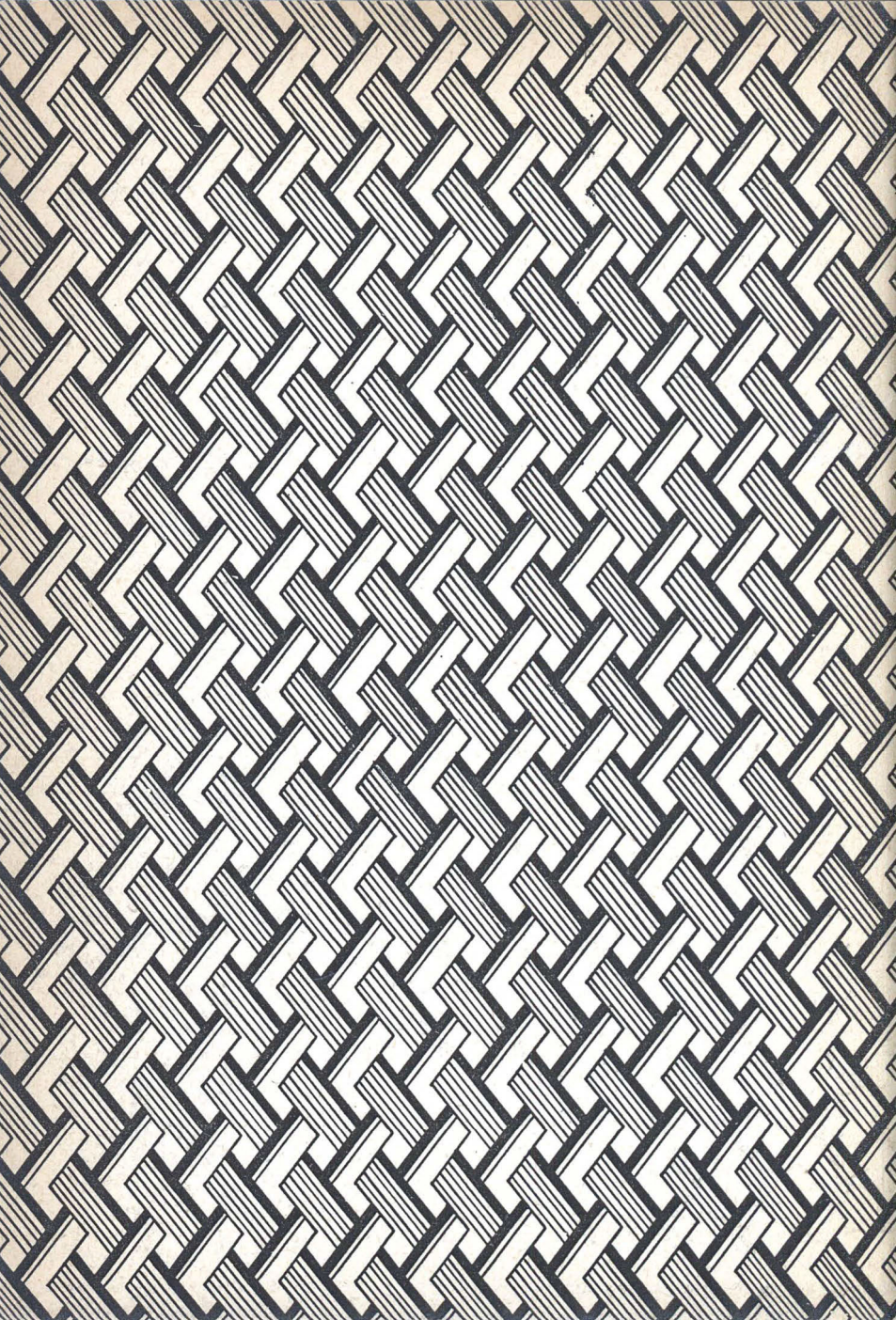
"That's so!" she agreed, looking startled. "I forgot all about the assignment Mr. DeWitt gave me! And this is a big story!"

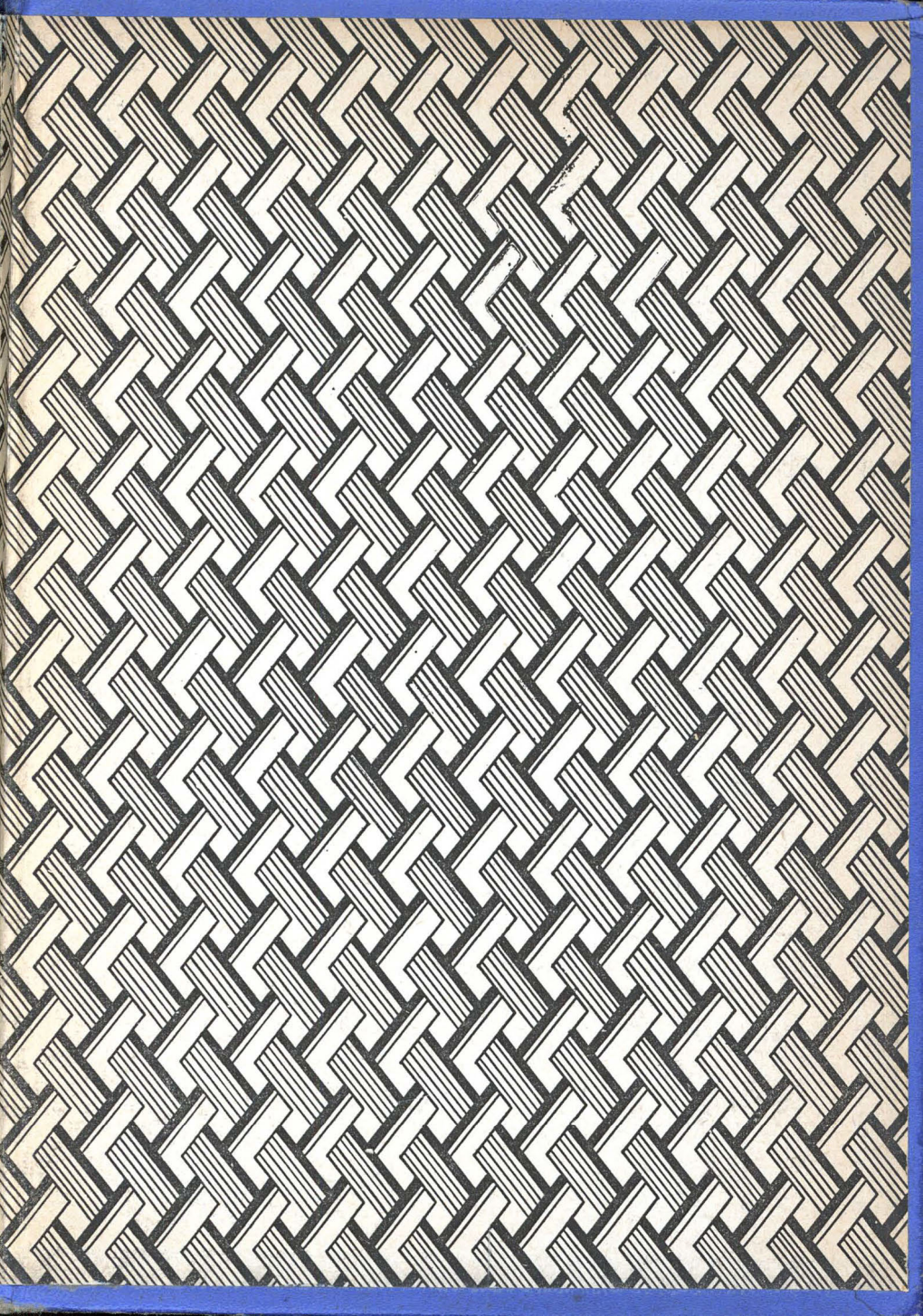
"Tremendous!" her father corrected. "Think you

can shoot copy fast, or will you need Jerry to take over?"

"You'll hear no S.O.S. call from me," Penny laughed, her active mind already thinking in terms of front page headlines. "Writing this story will be duck soup compared to digging up the material. Just lead me to a typewriter!"

End





THE CRY AT MIDNIGHT

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